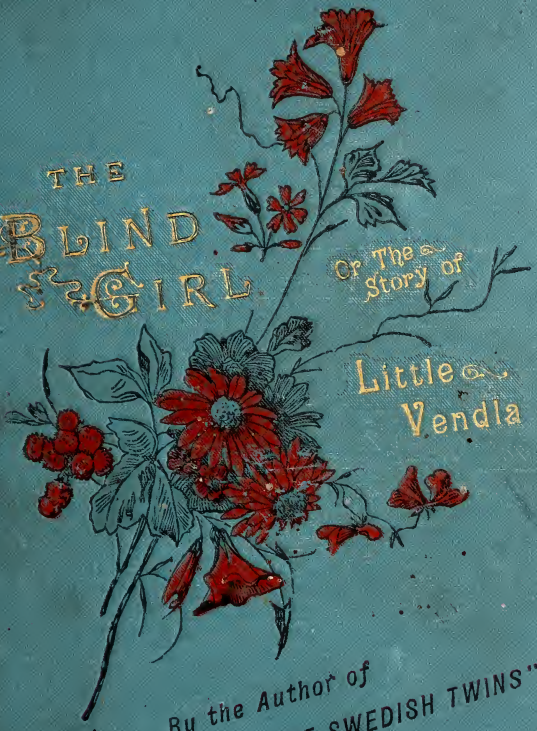
THE BLIND GIRL

Or The Story of Little Vendla



By the Author of "THE SWEDISH TWINS"

.60

" I'll take care of it till he comes," said Stina.

Page 92.

THE BLIND GIRL

A Swedish Story

"Drew up his horse to go to the rescue."

page 35.

T. NELSON AND SONS
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THE BLIND GIRL

OR

The Story of Little Vendla.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE SWEDISH TWINS,"

ETC. ETC.

"When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up."
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THE BLIND GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

BLIND.

ITHOUT, it was a white world, snow on the ground, frost on the trees, and the sky with its cloud curtains as white as the earth beneath. Under the cottage windows there were a whir and a stir, where a feast had been spread for the sparrows, which came and went, and chattered and ate, as if it were June instead of December.

Within, there were hurry and flurry: the pastor's wife was stepping hither and thither;

sturdy Stina was doing enough for a pair of strong women; and the children were as busy as if, after all, the fate of the battle depended on them. Yet this was nothing uncommon; just what happened every morning—a kind of whirlwind of putting up and putting in order, after which there were neatness and calm for the rest of the day.

The pastor must see a sick woman out in the dark forest, so away he had gone in the morning twilight, away under the birches, and left the red cottage far, far behind him. Cottage it was, and but one story high, and hardly a parsonage in Sweden was smaller; and yet for his home the pastor daily thanked God from the depths of his heart. And well he might; for the rooms were as cozy as cozy could be, and there was a spirit abroad in the house that would have brightened the dingiest prison.

The pastor had married a sunbeam—at least so he often affirmed to himself, as he looked at

his wife with her five children about her, as cheery and healthy as she.

The cottage was as full as a nest of young robins just ready to fly. As to the children, Hagbard, the eldest, bright boy, was lodged like a prince on a couch in the study, and the two little girls slept on the long dining-room sofa, their feet to each other. Of course mamma had the baby; and little Fritz in his basket was just where papa could lay his hand on the rascal, who, even in sleep, could hardly keep quiet for an excess of health and high spirits.

Willing hands had been working their wonders; the house was as neat as a humming-bird's home, and the coffee was steaming hot in the kitchen; and yet no papa had appeared.

"I can't think what is keeping your father!" mamma had exclaimed, when there was a long "pr-r-r-h!" at the door, which Pontus understood to be whoa! and drew up at the steps in magnificent style; for the pastor liked a good horse, and Pontus was up to his standard.

"But papa has got some one with him!' said Guda, who had her face pressed close to the window.

The pastor's wife was out in a moment to give her husband a welcome. She looked with surprise at the small guest he was helping down from the sleigh, then said, with a beaming expression, "You have brought little Vendla home for the day; that was a nice thought."

"We must keep her, at least, until Christmas, and perhaps—perhaps as long as she lives. Mother Mina won't live over to-night. It has been very sudden; and I don't know how the poor blind little thing will be able to bear it."

The pastor had spoken in French to his wife, but now he changed into his pleasantest Swedish, as he said, "Come, little Vendla. So! over the threshold and into the house!" and he gave the child a flying leap into the entrance-room to the cottage.—"Take off Vendla's things, you little girls. It is not much she has

on. I have had her under my fur coat the most of the way."

Cheerful and loving as he always had found her, the pastor now anxiously looked at his wife to see how she was taking this admission of a new inmate into the over-full home. He need not have feared. She pressed little Vendla close to her motherly heart with a murmured "God help the child!" which set the pastor's mind completely at rest.

Guda took the new-comer in hand in a business way, and soon had her wee shawl hung up in the entry; but the white-dotted handkerchief Vendla had on her head she insisted on wearing, holding tight to the knot under her chin, but saying never a word.

"Let her keep it on," said papa, who saw that Guda was inclined to be firm in her discipline. "She fancies having it so, and Mother Mina has let her have her own way."

Ingeborg, the second daughter, just ten years old, gave a shrug that did not seem to approve

of Mother Mina's ideas of education. Indeed, it was doubtful if she admired the family at all, for she had not so much as touched Vendla with the tips of her fingers.

"Now through the parlour, now into the dining-room, and here we are at the kitchen door," said the pastor cheerily, as he led Vendla by the hand. "Here, in the kitchen, Stina lives; and here Vendla must sit down, and we must all have some breakfast."

Stina perched Vendla up in a chair much as if she had been a wooden child, and went on with her work, taking no further notice of the stranger.

It was well Vendla could not see the dark cloud on Stina's broad face as she murmured to herself, "A new piece of the pastor's foolishness!" For papa had whispered to Stina, "This is to be Vendla's home now."

Stina had watched over the pastor's wife in her childhood, and had followed her when she was married, "to look after that babe of a

housekeeper," as she herself said, "and keep things from going to ruin."

Stina had, in the drawer of her own bureau (which served her for travelling-trunk, wardrobe, and general place of deposit), a medal from the Royal Patriotic Society, for having served eighteen years in one family—a treasure she regarded with measureless pride. With the right to wear such a tribute pinned to her breast, what wonder Stina was overbearing at times! It was her order, her North Star,* to which other people must look for counsel and guidance.

"Another mouth to feed, and Heaven knows we have enough already!" muttered Stina, as she took the coffee from the fire and made her last arrangements for breakfast. Not that there was any sumptuous fare in preparation. The morning meal at the pastor's was simple enough. There was but the golden butter, with a sprig of parsley here and there on its

* The North Star is a much-coveted Swedish order.

light ridgy flakes, and the basket of brown bread, as hard as sea-biscuit. But the cloth, of Stina's own weaving, was as white as the snow, and the quaint silver coffee-pot as bright as when it was new, at grandmamma's marriage.

The family all stood with clasped hands round the table while little Fritz asked the blessing. It was a sweet, simple couplet, something like this:—

> "In Jesus' name we take our seat;
> God bless the food his children eat!"

In Fritz's baby "lingo" it seemed but two words, in some strange language made up of vowels; but he looked very solemn, and all bowed at the close, and sat down as soberly as if the blessing had been pronounced by a bishop.

Guda went round with the coffee-pot: Stina had disappeared; for, as she said, "the family always did their own stretching."

The conversation naturally turned on the stranger.

"I likes Bendla," said little Fritz to his next neighbour.

"She looks very well for a peasant's child," said Miss Ingeborg, who had some grand ideas of her own.

"A peasant's child! That is just what I was," said the pastor. "Do I look well enough for that?"

"Oh, but it was very different with you, papa!" said Ingeborg, blushing. "Your father was not a poor labouring man."

"Not exactly," said papa with a smile. "But as to Vendla, she is my particular friend, and I think she looks well enough for anybody's child."

The pastor's "particular friend" was a slight, straight little girl, in a dark home-spun dress falling down to her feet. Under her handkerchief she hid her light hair, but not the decided, young face, with its thin nose, close lips, and high colour coming and going. Her eyelids were always cast down, but there was nothing

repulsive in the bit of deep blue that was seen through the long lashes.

"Vendla is Ingeborg's age," said papa after a moment's silence, "but a whole head shorter, I should think."

This remark was addressed to mamma; but there was no answer, for at that moment there was a shriek from the kitchen—a child's shriek, as if in terrible pain.

The pastor and his wife were on the spot in a moment. There stood little Vendla, her face burning red, stamping her foot, while she screamed, "It is not so, you bad, bad boy!" the great tears streaming from her blind eyes.

The great clumsy boy whom she was addressing plucked off his hat at the sight of his master, and said, in answer to his look of inquiry, "Mother Mina is dead. She went off just after we came away. The doctor left word as he passed, and I just said so to Stina, when it seems like as if Vendla here was took by surprise."

Vendla turned her woful face towards the pastor, as if to hear him say it was all a mistake; but he only put his arm tenderly round her and drew her to his kind breast, where she sobbed out her sorrow.

"Little Vendla's mother is safe with the Lord in the happy heaven," said the pastor at last. "Come now with me, dear child; we must have our morning prayers, and we will ask God to take care of little Vendla, and let her meet her good mother some time in his beautiful home."

Vendla stood in awe of the pastor, and she let herself be led away, though still sobbing, and with the pastor's great handkerchief held close to her eyes.

No one knelt during the prayer, in which the orphan was tenderly remembered; all remained sitting, with hands closely clasped. The morning hymn followed, with mamma at the organ. Her voice was clear and beautiful, and the children joined in perfect time.

Vendla's tears ceased to fall; she listened, —listened as if she heard the angels up in heaven.

It was plain that music would be her best comforter. Many sweet hymns she heard that day, sweet hymns and pretty songs; now the mother alone, and now all the children together. It was a feast of harmony to poor little Vendla, who, in her darkness and sorrow and bewilderment, felt as if she were in some new dream-land, where sadness and joy were strangely mingled together.

"Where is Vendla to sleep, ma'am?" asked Stina, interrupting the "concord of sweet sounds" by her plain, practical question.

"Where had she better sleep?" said the mistress, with a deprecating look at the family servant.

"On the settee in the kitchen, I suppose," answered Stina; "I don't know of anything better."

So, when night came, Vendla was laid away

on the old-fashioned "settee," with Stina on her let-down bedstead beside her, murmuring low to herself, "Another child in the house! what a bother!"

It was a family tradition that Stina's temper had been a little soured long ago, when her betrothed, a thriving young carpenter, lost his all in a fire, and went off to America to better his fortunes. No message or letter had come for poor Stina to tell of his fate all the years she had waited and worried and hoped; and perhaps the children were right when they whispered, what time she was crossest, "Maybe she's been thinking of Hans."

Whether from thinking of Hans or from some other cause, Stina was but a poor sleeper. In a long fit of waking on that first night after Vendla's arrival, Stina heard a sob from the settee, then another and another.

Stina passed her hand over Vendla's face in the darkness. It was wet with tears.

What had come over Stina? She took the

little girl in her arms, and said, "There, take hold of my hand. You shall be my little girl. I haven't any little girl of my own, and I'll teach you,—oh, I'll teach you all sorts of things, and we'll have such a nice time together.'

"And won't Stina be cross, and say, 'Another child! what a bother!'?" said Vendla.

"Maybe I shall," said Stina; "but Vendla will know I don't mean it at all. But I am just as glad as I can be to have somebody to keep me company and be my own little Vendla."

Stina went on in this way in a coaxing tone, crooning and comforting and weaving backwards and forwards as she talked, and in a few moments Vendla fell fast asleep. Stina laid her down in her extempore bed, and—who would believe it?—kissed the child, and did not even think, "What a bother!"

CHAPTER II.

A STRAY LAMB.

ENDLA was soon quite at home in the parsonage. As the rooms were all in a row, with a wide door always open between them, she had but to keep on the strips of home-made carpeting that on the bare floors led from one door to another, and she could be quite sure as to where she was going.

To be sent with a message all the way to the pastor's study was Vendla's particular joy. To her he was something great and good and kind, something between her and all sorts of trouble.

It had never entered into the pastor's mind

to think of himself as either great or good in any one's eyes. For years he had laboured in his lone country parish, caring as little for the great world beyond as it had been caring for him. Study was his ceaseless delight, and week by week he added to the stores in his full, thinking mind. On Sunday he poured out his soul to his simple flock, and had the joy of seeing them growing in all that was good.

Great in person the pastor certainly was not. He was a little man, with a nervous, restless manner, and an absent look, as if he were wandering here below with his thoughts far away on a trip of their own. It might be they were up in heaven; or it might be they had strayed to the stable to wonder how Pontus was faring, and if Nils had forgotten to feed him. Nils was the stupidest of all stupid boys, and was only retained for the sake of his mother, a widow, who could so pay the rent of the cottage where she had been allowed to live on when her husband had died.

A week had passed since Vendla had been brought to the pastor's. "Bad Nils," as she continued to call him, was standing, in punishment for his general unworthiness, in the corner of the kitchen where Vendla had placed him. He liked the joke of being commanded by Vendla, and was, too, just now particularly pleased to be an observer of Stina's proceedings.

Stina was unlocking the lower drawer of her bureau, which Nils had never seen open. It cost Stina's strong arm an unwonted effort to draw out the heavily laden drawer, full to the top, he could see, of nice underclothing, yellow now, but the linen was of the stoutest and best.

"Umph!" said Nils to himself, with a satisfied air, as he slyly slipped off to the stable. He understood the matter at last, and that was a comfort.

It was Monday afternoon. Washing at the parsonage was done every three months, and

was a great affair, to be sure, when the women who came to help Stina were queens of the hour, and must be coaxed and considered and have five meals a day, while all ordinary doings were overturned for the time.

This was but a peaceful, commonplace Monday. Stina had her once-a-week privilege to sew for herself, and now she was planning her afternoon's work. Beside the bureau, Vendla sat on the floor, busily counting the garments that Stina laid in her lap. The drawer was empty at length. "Three dozen of each; that is right," said Stina, as she gave an approving look at the piles around little Vendla. "I wove them all myself at the old home. Mistress said I should have of the best. Well, well! We'll lay them in again. Who would have thought it then!"

Thought what Stina did not say, but she turned the key in the drawer with a hurried, sharp click, and began to cut up the two garments she had kept out with a sort of vindictive

swiftness, as if they were to blame for her troubles. When her mistress came in, half an hour later, Stina was sewing away on the strong yellow linen as if she were running a race with her needle.

"Here, ma'am," said Stina, pointing to a bundle of clothes that lay on a chair. "Mistress had better put up Miss Ingeborg's cast-offs. They can be kept for the baby. I have something about right for Vendla. There is no use in my holding on so to bygones."

The pastor's wife took up the parcel of clothes that lay on the chair, and went out without saying a word. She understood the sacrifice Stina had made.

"Vendla shall knit while I sew," said Stina, seeing the child looked restless and ready to cry.

"I used to, but I can't now. I haven't tried since I was sick, and my eyes—" here the tears began to fall.

"Psha, psha, child!" said Stina. "You can

knit, I daresay, just as well as ever. Here, you shall knit a striped piece, gray and red. Feel the yarn, and see if you can tell the difference."

It pleased Vendla to find that she could distinguish the colours by touch, as one was much softer than the other, and she began her work in good spirits. With much help and encouragement, and the letting down of more stitches than she took up, Vendla managed to knit a full inch. She had, besides, so pleasant an afternoon that she laughed loud when Stina put on the porridge for supper and said,—

"It will be sure not to burn to-night, for the bishop would never go by in such a storm; and you know, Vendla, if the bishop goes by the porridge is sure to burn."

Such good oatmeal porridge as it was! At least so the pastor said when it came to the table—"a supper fit for a king." Fit for the whole family to sup on was some kind of porridge every evening. Sometimes it was white,

with diamonds marked on it in cinnamon lines; sometimes it was of rye, chocolate brown; and sometimes, as to-night, oatmeal porridge, which the children all thought was the best.

Vendla did not seem to be enjoying her supper. Her plate was untouched before her as she stood by the kitchen table. Her face was crimson red, and her mouth was tight shut together, while there was an angry storm in her heart.

Stina had let Vendla count the money in her pocket-book while the porridge was cooking, and Vendla had said, as she fingered a five-crown note, "I should know that was money, anywhere. It don't feel like any other paper."

Ten minutes after, the note had been missing.

Vendla positively declared she had returned it to Stina, which Stina as positively denied.

"It is strange, very strange," said Stina, suspiciously, as she went in with the porridge.

"I am not used to having such things happen about me."

All the while Stina was busy making ready for the night, on the other side of the house, she kept shaking her head and mumbling,—"Of course she has got it. It's a pity of her; and such a nice-spoken child, and I was beginning really to like her."

When Stina came back to the kitchen, Vendla was not to be found. Stina lingered, and hunted in vain. At last she opened the dining-room door, and exclaimed—"I can't find Vendla; I do believe she has hidden away just to vex me."

"Perhaps only in play," the pastor said kindly. "Wait a little, and she will come out from her hiding-place."

A half-hour went by, and no Vendla appeared. Then all in the house began to be worried. Stina, of course, told her story, which made her listeners only the more uneasy.

The house was thoroughly searched again

and again, but no Vendla appeared. Her little shawl and head-handkerchief were gone from their accustomed peg in the kitchen; but it was hard to believe that the child had ventured out in the driving storm of wind and snow that had been raging all day.

It was in vain that Vendla's name was called by kind voices all over the premises; the howling wind was the only reply. The pastor equipped himself at once to go out in search of the child, with sturdy Nils as his helper and companion. When they stepped from the door they saw Stina out before them on the same errand, flurrying about in the snow, as if she supposed little Vendla was lost in the drifts banked up by the gate.

Out into the forest, towards Vendla's old home, the anxious party took their way. The pastor fancied Vendla might have started for the home of the kind neighbour who had cared for her mother during her last illness.

When they at last drew near the cottage

there was hope in the cheerful light that shone through the white curtains of the little square windows. The face of the old peasant woman who was sitting within brightened at the sight of the pastor, but it was only pleasure at receiving so welcome a guest. She had nothing to tell of poor Vendla, and could hardly believe it possible she was abroad in the pitiless storm.

Up and down along the drifted road, and even to the entrance of the far-away village, the anxious party made their way; but no one had seen or heard of little Vendla.

Discouraged and disheartened, at last the pastor sorrowfully turned his face homewards. The moon had gone down, and in the darkness and driving snow there was no hope of coming on the lost child.

That was an anxious, sleepless night at the parsonage, and many real prayers went up to the All-seeing to guide and guard the little wanderer astray from the fold.

Stina was almost wild with distress, ex-

claiming again and again, "I have killed the sweet lamb! I would rather have lost every crown I have in the savings-bank than a thing like this should have happened!" A strong expression for Stina, for her bank-book and her medal were like her two eyes.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW VISITOR.

ITH the early morning came a sleigh to the door. The guest was a stranger at the parsonage, a certain Count B——, who had lately inherited an estate in the neighbourhood, and had come to reside on the property.

The count was a tall, dry-looking old bachelor, whose affections were said to be centred on his cabinet of Northern antiquities, one of the best in the country outside the National Museum.

It was a living specimen of the animal kingdom, however, which had brought him from home that cold winter morning—a speci-

men that was to be rejoiced over at the parsonage as a priceless treasure.

Behind the count came his coachman, bearing a big bundle, wrapped in great shawls, which, when set on end in the hall, proved to be little Vendla, looking very shy, but with a bright red spot on her cheeks—defiant still and determined.

She burst into tears, however, on the pastor's shoulder, as he took her into his arms, exclaiming, "Dear child! dear child! Thank God you are safe!"

"I didn't do it, indeed I didn't do it," she whispered, putting her face close to the pastor's. "I am sorry I ran away. I didn't think any one would care. I didn't, indeed I didn't do such a thing."

"I believe you, little Vendla," was the pastor's kind reply. "But you must never run away again. If you are in any trouble, come and tell me about it, and we will try to make all right."

Vendla was consigned to Stina's safe-keeping, while the pastor, who had just come in with the band who had been out on another fruitless search for the child, eagerly inquired how she had come into the count's possession.

He explained the whole matter in a very dry way, and with the fewest possible words, as if Vendla had been a dog or a chicken, instead of a human being, with a soul of her own, and a whole household in distress at her absence. The pastor well understood there was heart at the bottom with the calm old stranger; but mamma looked flushed and disapproving, and could hardly keep the tears out of her eyes, to hear little Vendla's real danger treated so coolly.

One of the count's servants, the evening before, had taken, as usual, the by-road that turned off near the parsonage, and which led to the estate. He soon saw before him something struggling along in the deep snow, fighting its way desperately, now this way, now

that, but never getting out of the gully by the side of the road.

He thought at first it was some animal, wounded or somehow disabled; but he soon saw it was a child, and drew up his horse to go to the rescue.

The little blind girl would only say that somehow she had wandered from the path; that she should not have lost it if it had not been for the snow, that had drifted and changed all the road; but now she was puzzled and tired, and didn't know just what to do.

"Do!" said the stout man; "I'll take you with me, and take you where they'll give you some porridge, and a bed too, I'll warrant; for our mamselle is just as kind as she can be."

The mamselle,* who was housekeeper at the count's, proved as kind as she was represented, and Vendla had been tenderly cared

* In Swedish, a married woman, not of the higher classes, is called a "madame," and an unmarried woman a "mamselle."

for; but not a word would she say as to where she had come from, or why she was out on such a wild errand.

When morning came the good mamselle again plied her with close questions, but getting no definite answer, exclaimed at last, "How sorry and anxious they must be where you come from! Your mother, perhaps, is breaking her heart about you!"

"I haven't any mother," said Vendla, her lip trembling. "But if you think the pastor would care, I'll go back as soon as I can. I live there, now I haven't any mother;" and the little thing burst into tears.

The count was taking his breakfast in the dining-room, and he got the story of the wanderer when mamselle went in with the morning mail. He seemed to take an unusual interest in the affair, and declared he should take her home himself to the parsonage as soon as the sleigh could be got ready. To Vendla he said not a word when she was

brought out, bundled up for the trip, but he looked full at the little firm face. Of course, Vendla did not see the queer twitching around his thin mouth; she only knew he gave her cheek a bit of a pinch, and then said to the coachman, quite sharply, "You put her in by my side, and don't be all day getting started."

So Vendla had been tucked in by the count, and the coachman stood on the runners behind as he drove, and away over the snow went the little light sleigh. And so Vendla came home to the parsonage.

The count was not a church-goer, so even the pastor's face was unknown to him; but he needed no one to tell him which was papa and which was mamma; and that Stina was an old family servant; and that Hagbard was bright for his years, and knew it quite well; that Guda was kindly, and Ingeborg "miss-ish." The count had seen enough of the world to read all this at a glance.

Something new and unlooked for, however,

turned up for the count, when he got chatting in a friendly way with the pastor, while sipping his cup of hot coffee, to make the family feel easy to be taking their breakfast. The count was surprised that the pastor was so pleasant to talk to, so booked up in the news of the day, in his out-of-the-way corner, and so deep read on Northern antiquities too.

Hagbard was all ears during the count's conversation, for he had a bit of a cabinet on a shelf in a nook in the study. Some stone and bronze vessels there were, real relics, but they were chiefly casts of his own making from old treasures in the possession of mamma's eldest brother, to whom these, as well as all the wealth of the family, by law were entailed.

Hagbard was proud indeed when, after breakfast, the visitor praised his collection, and promised him he should take a cast from a piece of old Roman money lately found on the count's own estate.

While this went on in the house, a recon-

ciliation was taking place in the kitchen—a kind of surface affair—in which Vendla said she was sorry she had made so much trouble, and Stina again declared she would rather have lost her bank-book than have been so worried and fretted to have little Vendla out in the storm.

Vendla noticed that Stina did not say she no longer suspected her; but she gave her head a contented little shake, and was silent, while she comforted herself with the thought, "The pastor believes me, and that is the best after all."

CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

UNDER Stina's careful training Vendla was fast becoming a useful member of the household. It was astonishing how much she was learning to do. Time for play Vendla had, too, in abundance, which she enjoyed in her own quiet way.

Stina was busy at the fire one morning, when the pastor's wife came suddenly into the kitchen, saying, "Who was that?"

"Who was that what?" asked Stina in surprise.

"Who was that humming that sonata so perfectly?"

"I didn't notice," said Stina. "I suppose it

was Vendla. She is always at what she calls her piano."

Vendla had a long row of knives arranged side by side on the table before her. This was her piano; and it was her delight to touch the balanced blades in time, while she hummed some favourite tune, with now and then a pressure on a handle when she fancied a sharp might be needed.

Vendla was soon allowed to have real music lessons from the pastor's wife, who was doubly repaid for her trouble by the spur it was to the other little girls to see how blind Vendla went lightly over the obstacles that had cost them so many impatient tears. Her voice, too, was wonderfully true and sweet; and when she stood with her hands clasped, and sang her simple hymns, the pastor felt something at his heart that found vent in a fervent "God bless the child!" which with him was truly a love-prompted prayer.

No one ever thought now of Vendla's not

being a permanent member of the family. She seemed as much a part of the household as the pastor, or even the wise Stina herself.

Christmas was coming, and there was a busy time at the parsonage. The children had all sorts of secrets among them—secret purchases, and secret labours in all impossible places. Papa was writing his Christmas sermons, and mamma sat up late at night making mysterious gifts for the children.

There was no mystery in Stina's department. It was all plain, honest work of the homeliest kind. The family pig had ceased to go on four feet, and had been hung up by the heels, all pure and pink, on the great tree outside the kitchen door, to be afterwards transformed into the most wonderful variety of delicacies, simple and compound, under Stina's skilful hand. By Stina's special direction, his death-blow had been accompanied by an old rhyme, "För mat, inte för hat," to the effect that he was slain "for meat, and not from hate;" and this being

done, Stina made a black pudding out of his blood, of which she, like the rest, partook with a clear conscience.

After these sanguinary proceedings were over, Stina betook herself in earnest to the other preparations for Christmas. Every nook and corner of the house was cleansed and beautified. Brass, silver, and tin were so polished and scoured that they mirrored the happy young faces, and filled the home doubly full with many mysterious children.

Only Vendla was sometimes in shadow when the rest were planning their presents. Her little face grew very bright the day before Christmas, when a new idea had delighted her. Her piece of red and gray knitting, as big as Stina's broad hand, she had not known what she could do with it: it would make the pastor a needle-book. If only some one would help her, at least the outside would be her own work. And as to a lining, Stina would certainly give her a morsel of home-spun. "Don't you

remember, Stina," she said, "the bundle of pieces you had out that day—that day—you know when? You said they were red and gray like the yarn, and let me feel of the colours. Might I have a bit to line my needle-book? Guda, I am sure, would help me, and make it. Please, won't you, good Stina?"

Stina was in the midst of making a duck and her brood out of gingerbread dough, to swim on a gingerbread pond. Such a work of art she had executed for each of the children. Vendla's tone was so pleading that in a moment Stina's keys were out of her pocket, and she soon produced the roll of bright pieces to which Vendla referred.

"There then, child; I suppose that will do," said Stina, giving Vendla a scrap of gay home-spun.

"Thanks! thanks! it is so kind in you, Stina!" said Vendla.

To Vendla's utter surprise, Stina caught her in her arms, and exclaimed,—

"You poor lamb—you poor, innocent lamb! It was all my fault—it was all my fault! Just to think of it! Who would have believed it!"

"Believed what, Stina?" said Vendla, full of wonder.

"To think of it! Here was my five-crown note rolled up with the pieces. Feel of it, Vendla; it is my five-crown note. I remember now I took up the pieces and put them together. I must have had the money in my hand, and it went into the bundle. So here it is! Nobody's been at the drawer but myself, for I never let my keys go out of my pocket. Well, well! even the wisest may make a mistake. You won't mind about it now, will you, Vendla?"

"I haven't minded," said Vendla, a little proudly. "The pastor believed me. And you needn't mind, Stina," she added more gently; "you needn't mind either. I am glad it is found; just as glad as I can be."

A very happy afternoon Vendla had, sitting close to Guda, and hearing her tell just how the

needle-book got on, and having it at last put finished into her hands, to wrap it herself in a paper, on which Guda should guide her fingers to write the inscription.

By four o'clock it was dark. It was Christmas eve now. The children could hardly believe it for excess of delight. The Christmas tree stood in the dining-room, all hung with red apples, and dotted all over with gay-coloured candles that mamma was busily lighting.

The last little flame was beginning to kindle, when papa came in with the children, and Stina and Vendla and Nils had taken their places. Papa read aloud the sweet story of the Child in the Bethlehem manger, and then every one joined in the carol—a beautiful carol of praise to the Lord.

There was a sweet, glad moment of silence, as the children, wondering, looked at the tree, where the sparkling lights among the dark branches seemed as new to them as if this were their first happy Christmas.

No one spoke, till the baby gave a cry of delight; and then there broke forth from the children such a chorus of shouts, such chatter and prattle and clapping of hands, that mamma fairly laughed as she listened.

"Now, out with the lights!" shouted papa; and then there were such puffing and blowing, as if the little winds had been smuggled in from the forest. It was quick work with the lower branches, and then Stina's wet sponge finished off at the top, while she went round and round with her calm, practical look, as cool and collected as if Christmas eve were like every other night in the year.

Beside papa, on the table, was a heap of paper-covered parcels of all imaginable shapes and dimensions. Every parcel was sealed with a seal fit for a government document, and on each was an inscription, almost always in rhyme; for all must be poets for such an occasion.

Papa's verses were always the drollest, with

some happy hit at the foibles or faults of the person for whom the gift had been so lovingly chosen.

Hagbard had ventured a stanza in Latin that brought a blank on the faces of mamma and the girls; but papa came in with, "Well done, my boy!" and such a funny impromptu translation, that what seemed at first to fall flat was a brilliant success after all.

Papa read aloud each time the verses, and then the name that stood on the parcel; and the owner came forward to take it, and guess, if he could, who had been so kindly the giver.

One little package was addressed to the pastor, and the couplet upon it was much like a tall man with his wee bit of a wife, who seemed, after all, just made for each other. The short line was simply, "I made it, at least the outside;" while the long line was a list of all the sweet words of affection a child might address to a pastor.

"This, then, is for me," said papa, as he

zealously broke open the seal. The children were on tiptoe, for only Guda had been in the secret.

Such a clumsy, big needle-book as the pastor drew out! just fit for a seaman setting out for Australia, who meant to do his own mending, and put a stitch in a sail now and then in case of extremity.

Papa felt warm at his heart when he saw it. "So this is from our little Vendla," he said. "God bless you, my child; I shall value it always!"

"I told her, papa didn't use a needle-book," said Guda; "but she would have it so. Stina gave her the lining, and I sewed it together. The poetry she made up herself; I only guided her hand to write it. I am glad you like the needle-book; I didn't think it was pretty," said Guda, in her slow, drawling way.

"Like it! I am delighted with it," said the pastor; "and I shall be sure to put it to some very good use. So Vendla and I must shake

hands, while I thank her, before we go on to the rest of the presents." Perhaps there was a thought of, "She hath done what she could," in the mind of the pastor. There was, at least, a world of grateful love in the poor little gift.

The children had not understood how to pity Vendla before that Christmas eve. It had seemed so natural that she should be blind, while their young eyes were taking in all the sweet blessings of light. But when they saw her standing silent and unmoved before the sparkling Christmas tree, with a sad look on her face in the midst of their shouting, they felt for the first time what it was to be blind.

"She can't see dear papa either, or mamma with the baby in her arms! Oh dear!" whispered Guda to Ingeborg, "I mean to be just as kind to her as I can be. I am sorry I did not think of it before."

Ingeborg said nothing; but Vendla wondered what made Ingeborg "so nice" to her that evening, and why she said, "Sleep well, sweet

Vendla!"* when she bade her good-night, as if she had been her own sister.

What happy little heads the children all laid on their pillows! happier were not to be found in old Sweden. A breath of the love that brought the Christ-child to earth had come to little blind Vendla, and she, too, fell asleep, with a Christmas joy deep down in her heart.

* It is common in Sweden to say, "sweet friend," "sweet child," as we find the words used in the old English writers.

CHAPTER V.

THE DINNER.

IT was Christmas morning. The early service was always the great delight of the day, so of course the children were up long before dawn,—no difficult matter when it was nine o'clock before the sun thought of rising. The stars were still twinkling in the dark winter sky when the happy little band were ready to start.

"What a pity Vendla can't be with us!" said Ingeborg, and she felt superior at the considerate thought for the little blind girl. "It would be of no use, of course, for she couldn't see the beautiful cross, nor anything else, poor thing!"

"Vendla can hear the singing, and the good

prayers, and the pastor's sermon, and understand them too, if she is blind," said Stina. "Of course she is going. She was awake the first in the house, and singing such a beautiful little carol that she heard your mamma go over just once, when she was talking with your papa about what we should have for the Christmas tree. Your mamma said it was too hard for you children, but Vendla can sing it, I can tell you. I have her all wrapped up in my blanket shawl out there in the kitchen. I shall carry her where the snow is the least bit drifted. Yes, indeed; she shall be at the church. God bless the poor lamb!"

Stina was not in a very good humour, but once out in the crisp, cold air, with Vendla skipping at her side, she cleared off cheerily, and was in a right spirit for the joyful occasion.

The ten minutes' walk to the church was over a country road, lonely sometimes, but now trodden by hurrying feet, all moving with the glad free step that told of a willing errand.

The lights set in the windows of the scattered cottages to brighten the way for the worshippers twinkled out their friendly rays in the morning air, as if they had their part in the Christmas rejoicing.

The children stood still for a moment as they entered the church. It was not dressed with wreaths and green branches; but far away, in the choir, stood a high cross, all sparkling with shining lights, as if the very stars had come down to tell of their Bethlehem Brother. Every seat was soon full, and an eager throng crowded the aisles, old men and little children, and even babes in the arms, who clapped their small hands and twittered with glee, and so had their share in the feast of the infant Jesus. They were but "simple folk" who heard and loved and praised. Not a bonnet among all the women, only the wonted black head-handkerchief of the peasants; but on the bowed worshippers, no doubt, came a blessing from the great Friend of the poor.

On the men's side Ingeborg had managed to spy two gentlemen, who, coming in late, took their seats far down by the door. One was Count B——. But what brought him to church—so early, too, in the morning? It must have been his companion, that elderly man with the round, pleasant face.

Papa had not seen them. He said so at once when Ingeborg asked him the first moment they entered the house. She had not liked to speak of it on the way home. There was something about papa when he had been preaching, a sort of holy stillness the children never ventured to break.

Ingeborg's stranger was again at the church for the long morning service, and sitting so near them that her curious eyes opened wide as she saw the chain round his neck, and the great golden cross that hung on his breast. "It is the bishop, Guda, the new bishop," she whispered.

"Who? where?" questioned Guda, so loud

that Ingeborg was glad to put her finger on her lips and point to mamma, who was stirring uneasily in the midst of the collect when she heard this whispering near her.

"Why didn't you stop to speak to the bishop, little old woman?" said the pastor to his wife, as he overtook her on the way home from church. "I looked for you to present you to him, but you had gone."

"I thought of the baby, and hurried a little," said mamma. "I did not know he was in church till Ingeborg just told me."

"Well, well, you will see him," said papa. "I have asked him and the count to dinner on Thursday, the first day they could command, and they both accepted very cordially."

"The bishop and Count B—— to dinner!" said the pastor's wife, a shade coming over her motherly face. "What shall we give them?"

"A friendly welcome, and anything you have in the house. Pea-soup and pancake, if you

choose—the regular Thursday dinner. Everybody likes that, I am sure," said papa.

The pastor's wife laughed a merry little laugh as she said, "Oh, that would never do, if only for Stina's sake! You shall see how nicely we shall manage."

There was much consultation between mistress and maid before the day of the dinner arrived; yet the bill of fare was after all but a modest one.

Stina had cut a wonderful open-work paper-cover for the geranium in full blossom that stood in the midst of the table. The snow-white damask of the cloth shone like satin, and as for the glass, its crystal brightness was beautiful to see.

As usual, the food was not put on the table. The children generally acted as waiters; but to-day it was the transmogrified Stina, in her neat home-spun dress and holiday manners. Vendla stood ready to summon Stina when her services were needed, and Guda had been de-

tailed to take charge of Fritz and the baby. So, with good management, the much-dreaded dinner went off very nicely.

The simple bill of fare was as follows:—

First course.—Bouillon, clear, with little tarts to be dropped in it.

Second.—Salt salmon made up in a light pastry compound, to be eaten with butter-sauce, flavoured with Zante currants.

Third.—Roast pig, with stewed *lingon* (red bilberry), and boiled apples for acid. The vegetables with the pork were potatoes the size of walnuts, browned, and laid round the edge of a platter like a string of great beads; and carrots cut in fancy patterns, in diamonds, with pease of Stina's own bottling, which filled the centre of the dish, of which the potatoes served for a border.

Fourth.—Cold waffles, a kind of spiritual representation of the English dainty of the same name, with all of its charm and none of its earthliness; thin, crisp, brown waffles, that

melted in the mouth. With the waffles was served the preserved Arctic raspberry (*Rubus Arcticus*) that grows in the far, far North—a delicacy even in Sweden for its exquisite flavour. The raspberries had been sent to the pastor from his boyhood's home, where the midsummer days last all night, and the sun just pops into bed and then pops up again, saying good-night and good-morning almost in a breath.

For some time the talk at the table was almost exclusively between the gentlemen, but there was suddenly quite an unexpected change in the speakers. The bishop happened to mention that the Swedish king Charles XI. once made his courtiers swallow all the bones in the little fish they were eating, saying it was unmanly to pick them out. Vendla's face brightened so intelligently that the bishop's attention was attracted. "Do you know anything about Charles XI., my little blind friend?" he asked. "One would think he was an acquaintance."

"I know a little about him," said Vendla, dropping her courtesy, and blushing all over.

"Well, let me hear what you know," said the bishop in a tone that was a playful command.

Vendla's heart was in her throat, but she dared not disobey. "Shall I tell the plain part, or the story part?" she asked.

"The plain part, of course," was the amused reply.

Vendla began, speaking as fast as she could: "He was sickly when he was a little boy, and they didn't think they could raise him, but they did. He liked big breakfasts and short lessons. Though he was a king, he was not a good speller. He did not like books, but he was very fond of horses. He knelt when he prayed, and he read the Bible through many times. He was seventeen years old when he began to be really king. He was not a big man, but he was strong; he was not a bright man, but he made a good king. He fought the

battle of Lund, and took away the power of the nobles."

"Stop! stop!" said the bishop. "Only one thing more. Who succeeded Charles XI.?"

"His son, the great Charles XII.," said Vendla, drawing herself up, as if she had a share in the glory of the fighting young king.

"That will do. Very well! very well!" said the bishop.

Vendla could not see the pleasant smile that accompanied the words, but she understood that the tone was most friendly.

"Now you can go, Vendla," said her mistress, and away went the child to the kitchen.

"Your little maid does you credit," said the bishop to the pastor's wife. "Does she learn very easily?"

"She is a shy little thing, and I hardly know what she is capable of doing. She has not been with us long," was the reply. "I am as much surprised as you can be at her familiar acquaintance with Charles XI."

"Don't you know, mamma, it was my lesson last week, and you told us ever so much about Charles XI., and Vendla was in the room hushing the baby. She learned it all then, I am sure."

Hagbard was so full of interest in what he was saying that he forgot he was in the presence of strangers.

"Mamma said we were not to talk at the table," said Ingeborg with her lips, so that only Hagbard could hear.

Mamma did not seem at all displeased with Hagbard, but said, "Yes, I remember it now. The little thing! I did not once think she was listening to the lesson."

"That child ought to have an education. It is a pity she cannot be sent to the Blind Asylum," said the count.

"She seems doing very well where she is," said the bishop, with a complimentary wave towards the pastor's wife.

The conversation now turned on the new

methods of teaching the blind, and little Vendla was lost sight of in the general subject; yet that day was a turning-point in her life. A change came over her daily occupations. She was now admitted as a regular listener during mamma's lessons with the children; and Stina was likely to become well versed in the doings of the Swedish kings, and the locality of cities and mountains—for to her Vendla regularly rehearsed every day all she had heard, and so prepared for the recitation of the morrow.

Vendla had now something pleasant to think of, and her face grew round with cheerful content.

It was not on Vendla alone that the bishop's dinner had left traces in the pastor's family.

Fritz, who had heretofore preached to the chairs as a simple pastor, was now self-appointed to the state of a bishop; and being furnished by Guda with a yellow cord chain and a gold paper cross, he strutted about the very picture of clerical pomposity.

As for Ingeborg, she talked of "the count" and "the bishop" as if they were her personal friends, and suitable companions for her ladyship; for was not her mother of a family all noble, having a sword or a helm, or something as knightly, at the end of their names? Somehow Ingeborg seemed to forget that the other children had the same claim as herself on her mother's relations. She swallowed up all the honour and glory, leaving them to be plebeians and peasants, like those far-off cousins of her father, who came to see him sometimes, and thanked Stina as much for their food, after dinner, as they did papa and mamma.*

As for Hagbard, somewhere about the time of that wonderful dinner he learned that it was not gentlemanly to be boastful and overbearing, and that it was no mark of high breeding to be pretentious or foppish, or

* It is a Swedish custom for the children and guests in a family to thank the father and mother, after dinner, for the meal they have enjoyed.

affected; a discovery that contributed much to the family comfort and peace.

Better still, it was plain that with the new year Hagbard had turned over a new leaf. Mamma, with tears in her eyes, had told papa that Hagbard had his Bible in the nook by the window in the attic, and that the mark went steadily forward; and that a page was turned down in his "psalm-book" at a hymn which was a prayer for a holy and humble walk with God.

That was glad news for the pastor, who had "no better joy than to know that his children were walking in the truth."

CHAPTER VI.

SOMETHING LOST AND SOMETHING FOUND.

IT was half-past three on a winter afternoon. The sun was just setting, and already an evening quiet seemed to have come over the snow-covered landscape.

Suddenly there was a merry shout, as the children of the parsonage all came out, a happy party equipped for a "coasting" frolic. They were just starting, when Guda caught sight of Vendla at the kitchen window, her head bent forward to hear the sound of their voices, while her little face looked wistful and sad.

"Vendla might go with us!" said Guda, turning back.

"Yes; and she could carry our shawls," said Ingeborg. "That is a good idea."

"She shall ride on my sled," said Fritz, who was Vendla's sworn champion.

"And mine too, as much as she chooses," said Hagbard. "It is a shame we didn't think of her before."

A few moments more, and Vendla was equipped for the excursion, and tripping over the snow as cheerily as the rest.

Guda had taken the little blind girl, for the time, under her especial protection, and unwittingly reminded her constantly of her misfortune by saying, "Now we are going through a gate; now we turn to the right; now we turn to the left; now we go down; now we go up," —most of which facts Vendla's quick observation would have taught her, without one word from her companion.

The ride on Fritz's sled Vendla insisted on taking, though the fat little steersman landed her in a snowbank, as Ingeborg had predicted.

Vendla had her hand sorely pinched under one of the runners,—a fact she kept to herself, though the tears came into her eyes for a moment.

She dashed them away, as Hagbard just then shouted, "Now all you girls shall have a ride on Ormen Longe;" * for he had named his new sled after the dragon ship of one of the fierce old vikings. It was a happy hit; for the sled was a long affair, indeed, and a marvel of narrowness too. Hagbard declared that it measured three ells from tip to tip on the runners. The seat was half a foot wide, all covered and cushioned; and there the girls sat, one after the other, each holding fast to the waist of the next. Guda linked the others to Hagbard, and held him so tightly with her strong arms that he said, "One would think we needed to be tied as fast together as a party ascending Mont Blanc, instead of just 'coasting,' where all is plain sailing. I can't

* "The Long Serpent."

think what makes girls so afraid of everything."

That was a charming afternoon for all. Even Vendla was so merry she almost forgot she was blind. So many exploits as they had to talk over in the evening! Such cold, such dangers, such escapes would have befitted a party of Arctic explorers.

Stina had made a cheerful pine-fire in the white porcelain stove that stood like a monument in the corner of the dining-room. To her they made their chief boasts, as she came in now and then to stir up the coals with a long poker that looked like a trident.

Papa and mamma had gone to a funeral in a distant part of the parish, and would not be home until quite late, they had said.

"I am sorry we must stay to the funeral dinner," mamma had imparted to Stina. "I do dislike these funeral dinners, and the whisky, and all. But here I am willing to go, for I hope I may be of some comfort to the widow."

"Mistress won't forget to bring home some candy for the children," was Stina's irrelevant answer. She did not share in the scruples her mistress expressed. To Stina, the punch, and the funeral dinner, and the bon-bons all wrapped in black and white papers, were as much a part of a death in a family as the white collars and aprons of the mourners.

It made variety in life for Stina when the pastor's wife was present on such an occasion; for then she could hear if the pig were roasted to a turn, and perhaps of some new kind of small cakes that were served with the coffee.

The funeral dinner when old mistress died was one of Stina's strong points in conversation, when chance gave her a chat with some "help madame" who went round to assist on such occasions of feasting. Even now it ran in her thoughts as she went in and out among the children.

"Your mamma won't see such a table as we had when your grandmamma died," began Stina.

"Do tell us about grandmamma's home," said Ingeborg, who liked to revel in past grandeur.

But Stina was not just then to be the centre of interest.

Hagbard was searching his pockets, with a look of blank dismay on his face. "I have lost the count's medal!" he exclaimed,—"the medal he lent me to cast after."

"But your copy is just as good as the count's, and nicer-looking too, I am sure," said Guda, who meant to be comforting.

Hagbard did not deign to reply, but continued searching and thinking, and searching and thinking again, but all to no purpose.

Ingeborg was in deep distress. Anything that concerned the count was to her a matter of personal importance.

"What if I pulled it out with my handkerchief when we were 'coasting!' It is too dark now to look for it; and I am sure it will snow before morning," said Hagbard.

"What made you carry it in your pocket? It was so childish!" said Ingeborg, severely.

"I liked to have it about me," answered Hagbard. "I thought it was perfectly safe. Papa said I might take it home myself to-morrow; and now what shall I say to the count?"

'Let's go to the vestibule; perhaps it dropped there on the floor," suggested Ingeborg.

"I think we had better search all the house before you are in such a terrible flurry," said Guda, who began to look in all impossible places.

"You know I found mamma's thimble," said Fritz, as he started on a creeping tour round the dining-room.

The fruitless search was over, and the children were drearily grouped round the dying embers, when Vendla opened the door, her face glowing with excitement.

"Here it is!" she shouted, as she held up the medal in her hand. "I found it where we were 'coasting.' I remembered when we came

through the gate at the head of the hill I heard something fall. I wondered what it was then It must have hit on the stone that Stina put to make the gate shut tight, for it lay just beside it."

"O Vendla, I am so glad; I thank you so much!" said Hagbard. "I was dreadfully worried."

"Weren't you afraid to go in the dark? I wouldn't go that far alone in the night for anything," said Guda.

"I am always in the dark," said Vendla.

"The days and nights are just the same to Vendla. I never thought of that before," said Guda; and she put her arm tenderly round the little girl.

"Vendla's Number One!" said Hagbard. "To think we never heard it fall!"

Wasn't it well I thought to have her with us?" said Guda, while Ingeborg was fondling and examining the coin that had lately been such a cause of anxiety.

"Oh, I forgot," broke in Vendla; "there's a man in the kitchen."

"A man in the kitchen!" said all the children in a breath. "Who is he? How did he get in?"

"I don't know who he is. I let him in. There's something queer about him, and he don't speak like the people round here. He's an awful big man, and very heavy."

"I'm afraid," said Ingeborg, who was really timid, and did not try to hide it. She thought a little delicate fear suited her ladyship well.

"How did you know anything about him when you didn't see him?" said Guda.

"Why, he came on the kitchen steps just when I did. His voice sounded high up when he spoke. He stepped very heavily on the floor, and he had his stick in his left hand, on the side I was; and when I couldn't open the door quickly, he helped me with the same hand, and stood up his stick against the house. There was certainly something queer about him."

"What made you let him in?—and Stina not there, too!" said Ingeborg.

"Why, he asked for Stina; and I knew she was at home, and would be in from her milking directly."

"I must see who it is," said Hagbard, taking the trident poker in his hand, and starting at once for the kitchen. The girls followed at a respectful distance, all but Vendla, who went before, as if she were responsible for the stranger, and must present him to the rest of the family.

He was not alone: when the children opened the kitchen door, Stina was hanging on his arm, and crying as if her heart would break.

"Do you know him, Stina? What is the matter? Is anybody dead?" questioned Hagbard in his capacity of family protector.

"It is my *fästman*" (betrothed) "from over the sea. To think I should live to see this day!" sobbed Stina. "Here I found him when I came in. I knew him the minute I

set my eyes upon him; for haven't I always been expecting him?"

"I didn't know you expected him," said Guda, her eyes big with wonder.

Hagbard gave a dissatisfied look at the stranger, who was by no means prepossessing in appearance. "I suppose it is all right then," murmured Hagbard as he withdrew with his party of defence. It was a pleasant thought that papa would soon be at home. He would know what to think of the stranger.

What a buzz and a talk there were in the dining-room when the children were once more out of sight of the new-comer.

"I don't like his looks at all," said Ingeborg. "I shouldn't wonder if he were a pirate, or something as dreadful."

"A highwayman or burglar, perhaps," began Hagbard, for he liked frightening the girls. Just then he remembered that this was not the part of such a brother as he was trying to be and he hastened to say, "He did look a little

hard, but I guess all is right. Stina seemed certain she knew him."

"He hadn't any arm in his sleeve. I wonder why?" questioned Fritz.

"Because he had lost it somehow, of course," said Miss Ingeborg.

"That was what was queer about him!" exclaimed Vendla. "Now I understand the way he opened the door."

"I wish papa would come home," said Ingeborg; "I don't feel comfortable with such a man in the house."

There was a sound in the vestibule at that moment, and papa and mamma were soon in the midst of the group, when all were talking at once, mixing up the "coasting" frolic, the medal, and the stranger, in hopeless confusion.

"It is my *fästman* come home!" said Stina, who had hurried in to share her great joy with her mistress.

"Where has he been all this time?" asked papa, with the air of a judge on the bench.

"In America, of course. You see, the hurt he got in the fire was worse than he thought, and he had to go into hospital so soon as he landed. They took off his arm, those good-for-nothing doctors. I daresay, if we had had him here, Goodman Brink could have given him salve that would have cured it. Well, they took it off; and his little money was gone, and he got down-hearted. He couldn't write with his left hand at first, and time went by, and so he said he hoped I would take up with some strong fellow and forget all about him. Lately he'd got such a longing for old Sweden that back he comes, and straight from the ship he goes to find me out, for old acquaintance' sake, he says. Now mistress knows all about it."

"We shall have prayers now, and you can ask him to come in," said the pastor. "We are all tired and must be in bed early."

It was not by design, but in the regular course, that the parable of the prodigal son

was read that evening by the pastor. Yet it was no chance that made the good man in his prayer ask a special blessing for all those who had gone astray, and would now return like lost sheep to the heavenly fold.

The story of a wild and wandering life was written on Stina's *fästman.* His heart at least was not all hardness; for when the pastor took him by the hand, when prayers were over, and welcomed him back to old Sweden, who had need of all her honest sons, he drew his hand over his eyes, and looked the picture of a big penitent boy.

The *fästman* was accommodated with a bed in the attic; and early the next morning he was off, leaving his thanks for the pastor and his wife for their kindness.

Stina asked no more questions of "pedlars and people" about America, nor did she talk of her *fästman.* The family knew that every month came a letter to Stina, written in queer crooked characters, such as a man might well

trace with his left hand. After these letters she had long fits of thinking; but, on the whole, was more cheerful and pleasant than she had been since she came to the parsonage.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE PAST.

LITTLE by little Vendla had come to be a sharer in the sports as well as the lessons of the pastor's children. At blind-man's-buff she was as good if not better than the rest; and as for riddles and conundrums round the twilight fire, no one guessed them more readily than she. Of another sort of play she was especially fond—this was acting over the scenes and events in the history of Sweden. It was wonderful to see the little blind child happy in fancying herself now the little Margareta, a wife and a queen at eleven years of age; and now Christina, taking leave of her court; and

now the stern old widowed queen Ligrid, burning her lovers when she found them too troublesome. This kind of play was a favourite with all the children; and one spring afternoon they resolved upon getting up a representation in peculiarly fine style.

Papa was away from home on business of especial importance, and mamma was spending the day at a neighbouring country-house, the younger children being with her by special request. Stina had determined to profit by such an opportunity, and have a general scouring. The children were therefore sent to the garret, which extended all over the house, and was a charming place for a frolic.

At one end of the garret a little room had been taken off, which was Stina's retreat in warm weather. To get on the top of this room had long been the children's ambition. The way now seemed opened at last. Mamma had lately placed against the outside wall of the apartment the tall two-storied wardrobe in

which she kept her marvellous stores of house linen, and now its doors were open for an airing. The shelves made a sort of a ladder, by which Hagbard easily climbed to the top, and then a single step placed him on the beams that ran over the room where he stood, to the great admiration of the children.

The girls were easily persuaded to follow; and then, by the aid of Hagbard lifting her up, and Guda pulling from above, Vendla was helped through all difficulties to have her share in the fun that was to follow.

"A mighty dusty place this is," said Hagbard, looking about him. "I should not wonder if no one had been up here for a hundred years. Papa says this is one of the oldest parsonages in Sweden. I wonder who was here last. Just look at the cobwebs. We ought to play something real old now we are up here. I'll tell you what it is: you girls all sit down on the beams and I'll stand in front here and be Gustavus Vasa making his last speech to the

parliament; I know it perfectly. That will be splendid."

"But we ought to be somebody—somebody that lived at the time," said Ingeborg.

"I might be Laurentius Petri translating the Bible," put in Vendla, with enthusiasm.

"And I'll be Bishop Brask," said Ingeborg.

"But he was a Catholic," objected Vendla.

"I want to be a bishop, so I shall be Brask," said Ingeborg decidedly.

"I can't think who I can be," said Guda dolefully.

"You all ought to be women, of course," said Hagbard, "not bishops and such. You can be my three wives."

"But they did not all live at the same time," urged Ingeborg, dissatisfied.

"Oh, that is no matter! It will be fine to have you sitting a little back, like statues, while I make my speech. Vendla can be that young wife with the queer temper—I forget her name."

"Katrina! yes, I'll be Katrina," said Vendla, with great satisfaction.

"And Guda can be that wife who liked sewing, and baking nice things. That is a good part for Guda. Ingeborg must be the last wife, and sit farthest forward. That seems to make the history right. I wish I had something fine to put on, for Gustavus Vasa liked to be royally clad, you know our book says. Well, never mind. Now, you must imagine me as an old man, with my sons about me, and below there sit all the best people in the kingdom to listen to me."

Hagbard took his position firmly on the front crossbeam, and with as kingly a bearing as he could assume he began his parting address.

The voice of old Gustavus was boyish, and his gestures at first were too conscious; but there was feeling in Hagbard's young heart as he gave out the last speech of the grand old king. Hagbard was really moved when he came to the closing words:—

"My course will soon be run. I need not seek in the stars, or in any other mysterious signs, a token of my coming hour. My own body is its surest herald. That tells me that I shall soon stand before the stern King of kings, to account for the time-honoured but perishable crown of Sweden, which I have worn."

Hagbard stepped back to gain composure. It was a false move, and Gustavus soon found that one foot had slipped from the beam and made its appearance through the plastering of the room below.

The hero struggled to rise, but it took two wives to help him out of his trying predicament.

"What will mamma say? and Stina?" said Guda in affright.

"It is an awfully dangerous place up here," said Ingeborg. "I don't see why we came up."

"It was my fault, and I will take all the blame," said Hagbard, who felt enough of the Vasa in him to be magnanimous.

"What is it? what is the matter?" cried out Vendla in distress.

"Only my foot went through the ceiling. It is a ticklish place up here, I can tell you; the sooner we get down the better," said Hagbard.

"I can't get down! I can't get down! I won't stir!" screamed Vendla, who had been lost in the excitement of the speech of the great Gustavus, and was quite overcome at this sudden end to the imposing scene in which she had been living.

"Don't be afraid; we can help you," said Hagbard kindly.

But Vendla had lost all confidence in the hero, and refused to stir from her position far back against the wall, where she had been placed as belonging to the early days of the great Gustavus.

As usual, it was impossible to move Vendla when she had once made her decision. There she sat, crouched down and clinging on to the

beam, where she was perched like a frightened swallow.

"There is no help for it," said Hagbard; "I shall have to go down to Stina and ask her to help us."

This was courage in Hagbard, for Stina's wrath was no mean ordeal, especially when Vendla was concerned.

The sisters, meanwhile, had scrambled down as best they could, and Vendla was left alone in the midst of the dust and rubbish of mortar where she was sitting. She heard the footsteps die away, as the girls followed at a distance to see how Hagbard would get through with the interview.

Vendla tried to listen too, and as she did so she patted and felt about her to have a more perfect knowledge of her position. In the midst of the rubbish she suddenly came upon something that attracted all her attention. It was certainly a coarse little bag tied up with a string. It was heavy too, and there were

queerly shaped things in it. What could it be? Vendla felt and felt, and wondered and wondered, until she forgot all her fear, which had really been more nervousness and contrariness from her late excitement than real timidity.

When Stina came upstairs with the step-ladder, followed by the discomfited children, they were all surprised to hear Vendla call out, with great animation,—

"O Stina, I have found something! Do help me down, quick, and see what it is!"

"You just stay where you are, sweet child," said Stina, "and I'll come to you."

In another moment Stina had placed the ladder against the wall, and was walking along the beams as composedly as if she trod the kitchen floor. She took Vendla silently in her arms, and soon deposited her safely in the garret below.

"You senseless minx! you ought to have known better than to let these harum-scarums take you to such a place as that," said Stina to

her pet. "And what a fright you are, all cobwebs and dust!"

It was Vendla who had the scolding this time; for when Hagbard had gone boldly to Stina, and said, "I've got Vendla into trouble, taking her up to the top of the room in the attic, and now we can't get her down; and I've put my foot through the ceiling there, and made a big hole. Do help us, Stina," the old servant had looked into his face, and her eyes twinkled with something moist as she saw his manly bearing, and she only said, "Bother! So I must leave my work to help little missy down."

"Little missy" took very lightly her share of the blame. She could not so soon forget the affectionate hug with which Stina had just taken her in her arms, and understood that her rough friend was not so very angry after all.

"Do open it, Stina. Do open it, quick," said Vendla, holding up the little canvas bag that had lain half covered with mortar for many a long year.

"There's something strange in this," said Stina, as she looked suspiciously at Vendla's treasure. "My, how dusty it is!"—and she rubbed her fingers uncomfortably together—"and so heavy too!"

"Please open it, Stina," said Ingeborg, her dark eyes flashing with excitement.

"I guess it's nails the carpenters left," said Guda, speaking very slowly, as if after deep consideration.

Ingeborg's countenance fell.

"Nails!" exclaimed Vendla indignantly; "there isn't a nail in the bag, for I've felt it all over. There's something like a little book, or pocket-book, and a queer round thing I can't make out, and a heavy lump, hard and real heavy. I could feel it all as plain as could be."

"Perhaps the Lord has sent the darling a treasure. Who knows? His ways are wonderful!" thought Stina, and the little bag took a kind of sacredness in her eyes. "Your papa

will be home to-night, and I shall leave it to him to open it. I'll take care of it till he comes," said Stina, and off she went with the treasure in her hand.

There was an end to play for that afternoon. The sisters went over and over all the circumstances of their late adventure, and dwelt upon each with as much importance as if they were witnesses in a trial for murder. Alas for testimony! there were few particulars in which they could exactly agree. Ingeborg was sure she had first proposed climbing to the top of the room, while Guda was as sure it was Hagbard. On this and several other equally important points they had a long discussion, and Vendla was quite tired of being appealed to with, "Wasn't it so, Vendla?" for she was in a delicious dream of wonder, and preferred in all quiet to be imagining the contents of the mysterious bag, and puzzling over that round thing that baffled her best efforts at guessing. Hagbard, meanwhile, had bethought himself

of a lesson that was not too thoroughly prepared for his father's return, and had shut himself into the study in a severe fit of application. Stina, too, was in her fastnesses, with closed doors, ostensibly examining the injury done to the ceiling of the room in the attic, but really giving the canvas bag such a pinching and fumbling as would have made a hole in any bit of cloth not of the very strongest of fabrics.

"Yes, there certainly was a heavy lump down in one corner, and a something that might be a muffin-ring or an iron-stand, or some other trash. Perhaps it was all nothing but old iron." And Stina came out of her retirement. Having thrust the little bag into the depths of her sacred inviolable bureau, she judiciously attended to the most important business in hand, and went through the house again and again, like the spirit of order, until she had made it a model of neatness for the home-coming of the pastor and his wife.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLEASANT WAITING.

MAMMA'S spending the day was a literal thing, and lasted from morning till evening indeed. She was tired enough after a long drive over a rough road, with the baby asleep in her arms, and Fritz at her side in the same condition. Of course, they both woke out of humour; so mamma had quite enough to do to get baby off, in her own little carriage, on her sweet journey to dreamland, while Stina coaxed Master Fritz out of his pet into such a night's rest as only a tired little child can be blessed with.

Mamma had just drawn a long sigh of relief,

when the outer door opened, and there was a shout of, "It must be papa!" There was a general rush to the spot where the pastor was taking off his fur-coat as quietly as if he had just been out for an afternoon's walk, instead of having been absent for almost a week, for the very first time since Fritz was a baby.

The pastor had hardly got his full round of kisses, when Stina had supper brought in, and lingered herself to hear the good talk, when the master was just fresh from his journey.

In the mood for relating he certainly was, and told so many adventures that the children almost forgot, in their interest, the hole in the ceiling, and the wonderful bag that only father must open.

"So you dined at the bishop's, papa," said Ingeborg, who felt that in this she was somehow concerned.

"Yes," said the father, "and came near being too late for the dinner; for when I looked for my bands, they were nowhere to be found."

"Why, I put them all in—in Vendla's knit needle-book," interrupted mamma. "Don't you remember you said that would be just the thing to carry them in nicely?"

"Oh yes; and I found them next day. Vendla's needle-book had kept them as nice as could be."

Vendla, who had posted herself close behind the pastor, flushed with delight as she listened. She laughed, too, with the rest, when she heard why the pastor came late to the dinner.

The name is the same in Swedish for a clergyman's bands and for the ox-eyed daisy. Papa, of course, forgot this in his hurry; and when he stepped into a shop to ask where he could buy what he needed, and was recommended to go to a place at quite a long distance, off he went, never suspecting there could be a mistake, until he found he stood at the counter of a florist's, and an obliging young miss was handing him a bunch of white daisies. Tired and half-vexed as he was, he could not help laugh-

ing; and it all ended well, for the Flora in charge left him in her stead for a moment, and ran out to buy what he wanted, and let him put them on by her own little glass she had hung up in a corner.

"I know she thought papa was ever so nice," whispered Hagbard to Guda, who solemnly said, "I do," as she gazed at papa's kind, smiling face.

"What did the bishop say, papa?" said Ingeborg, getting back to her favourite subject.

"Say!" said papa; "why, he told so many funny stories, I haven't laughed so much for a long time. Perhaps the best was about an old man who came to a house-catechizing, when the bishop was just in priest's orders. The old man answered so charmingly, that the bishop praised him, and said that his neighbours would do well to follow his example. 'Little and gray, but able to pipe up, as St. Paul says,' shouted the old man in the greatest excitement.

The bishop said he never had such trouble to keep his countenance in all his life."

Hagbard thought this was a good time to make his confession. He did it frankly, taking all the blame to himself, and then at the close told of Vendla's discovery.

The pastor was stern as he reproved Hagbard for leading the girls into trouble, and especially Vendla, who could not take care of herself. And as to the injury done to the ceiling, he took that in a serious light, reminding the children that the parsonage was but theirs to be lived in, and it was little less than a kind of mean stealing to abuse property they held in trust for another.

Hagbard sat humbled and silent. Vendla's much-talked-of treasure, papa and mamma seemed to think unworthy of their notice—at least they did not seem in a hurry to see it.

Papa went on to say that the cathedral was a beautiful building, but a little fatiguing to speak in, especially when it was crowded.

"How did you feel, papa, preaching in that big church, with so many people to hear you?" asked Ingeborg, intensely interested.

"It was very solemn," said papa. "I tried to give a true message, for I felt there were many before me I should never meet again until we all go to give our account."

Hagbard's eyes fell on his father with a look full of respect and affection. Ingeborg gave a little twist on her chair, as if this had not been exactly what she had most cared to hear.

Papa had no more time for the children. He had prayers directly; and then he and mamma went off to the study, where they had a long conversation, with closed doors, a thing most unusual at the parsonage.

"Papa and mamma have a secret, I am sure. I saw them plotting and planning before he went away," said Ingeborg, quite disgusted at being shut out from the study.

"Plotting and planning?" questioned Guda.

"They only plot and plan the very best things

in the world; that you may be sure of," said Hagbard, in great disapproval of Ingeborg's mode of expressing herself.

"To think we must go to bed without opening the little bag," said Guda. "Everything seems to go wrong to-day."

"Then we had better make haste to end it, and say good-night," said mamma, who had just come in from what seemed to have been a most inspiriting talk with papa. "We will look at your wonderful bag in the morning."

CHAPTER IX.

VENDLA'S FIND.

HEN the pastor came in to breakfast the morning after his return, his plate was already furnished. Not that Stina had supplied some special dainty to tempt him, but there stood the little old bag, with its string around it, just as it had been knotted by some mysterious hand far back in the past.

"Please, papa, open it before we have our breakfast; won't you, dear, sweet papa?" pleaded Ingeborg.

"So this is Vendla's find! She must be here at the opening," said the pastor, as he looked at the unpromising budget before him.

Vendla was summoned, and Stina was not far behind her.

Papa laughingly took hold of the string, and, pretending to be very impressive, said over some gibberish, a kind of impromptu rhyme, in which Latin and English, Swedish and Italian, were all mixed up together. It sounded very grand and imposing.

"It is awful—I am almost afraid!" said Ingeborg, affecting to shudder.

The bag was no sooner open than all signs of ridicule of the treasure disappeared from the pastor's face. The first thing he caught sight of was a great golden neck-band, like a bracelet for a giant. He drew it out hastily. It was solid, and of very curious workmanship.

"This is indeed a find," he said; "so richly wrought and so heavy! Quite a mine of money, too; worth almost any sum in the eyes of antiquarians. It is evidently a neck-ring, such as the old Northmen wore. But how came it here? Such things have not been worn for hundreds

and hundreds of years. Perhaps it was stolen from some cabinet, and hidden by the thief where Vendla found it."

"I don't like to think a thief has touched it, papa," said Hagbard. "Perhaps it was dug out of the ancient grave in the long meadow, and was some old pastor's treasure, and—"

"Grave!" broke in Ingeborg, contemptuously. "Don't you remember, Hagbard, the count said what you call a grave was just as likely an old milk-cellar."

"Antiquarians have made such mistakes before," said papa, laughing. "It is hard to tell the difference when the entrance has been destroyed and the relics taken away. Hagbard may be right, after all. But wherever it was found, this is a beautiful thing. I do not believe there is a richer neck-ring in all Sweden. Vendla must handle it first, after mamma," he added, "for she was the finder."

With wondering fingers Vendla examined the curious old ornament, and then it went round

the table for every one to make its acquaintance. Fritz tried it on his fat neck, and said it would be a nice thing for him to preach in; and Guda wondered how much it would be worth if it were melted down and made into money.

"Melted down!" exclaimed Hagbard with indignation; but he stopped in the midst of his horror at the proposal—for papa was putting his hand in the bag—to see what would come out next.

It was a little, old-fashioned letter-pocket, made like a modern leather card-case. Some lady's delicate hand had embroidered on the green satin with which it was covered a cupid with a quiver and bow on one side, while on the other, two hearts, transfixed by the same arrow, were enclosed in a wreath of forget-me-nots. A folded paper lay within. It was but a short note of affection, beginning, "My beloved," and ending with, "Yours until death." There were no names. The note was written in the obsolete Swedish character, much like the Ger-

man; but the pastor, who was a lover of old manuscripts, read it with ease.

The tears filled mamma's eyes as he did so, as she thought of those who had "lived and loved," of whom, perhaps, this was now the only memento.

The girls gave the embroidery a critical examination, and pronounced it well done, but were evidently disappointed at this second yield from the wonderful bag.

A few trifling trinkets followed, all in very old style, and then came the hard lump from the bottom—a very heavy hard lump, tied up in a coarse rag. The knot was soon loosened.

"Money!" said the pastor, as the coins jingled in his hand.

"I thought so; it felt like it," said Vendla very quietly.

"Money, very old money; evidently a collection of gold coins," said the pastor, looking at piece after piece with the heartiest interest. "Here is a Roman aureus of the days of

Augustus, and this of the time of Diocletian and this of Justinian!"

"How near it makes one feel to the old Romans," said Ingeborg.

Hagbard was still looking at the coin of the days of Augustus, with a feeling of awe. He had recalled the words of the Scriptures: "There went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." "Perhaps our Saviour has touched this very coin; it could be," was the thought that went through his mind. He did not speak it, and in another moment he was watching his father, who exclaimed,—

"Here is a stater of the time of Alexander the Great, and Persian darics, too! This must have been the collection of some rich old antiquary. But how came it here?"

"The Lord sent it; that's plain," said Stina. "It is his way of getting Vendla where she can learn to read as blind folks do, what she is wishing for always. It is sent of the Lord, as the pastor himself must see."

"That may be," said the pastor kindly; "but right is right, and we must try and find out to whom these things really belong. Now all take one more look at the neck-ring, and then I shall seal up the bag, and have it in safe keeping."

There was a general look of dissatisfaction on the faces of the children, and when the sealing process commenced Vendla slipped away to the kitchen and curled up in a corner, the very picture of disappointment. "If this were the end of the mysterious bag, she might as well never have found it!"

Of course the talk at the breakfast-table was all of the little bag, and how it came hidden away in the attic. Papa was obstinate in his opinion that there had been some foul play, and there was a thief at the bottom of the secret.

"It is my belief some viking brought home those coins in his dragon ship, and when he died they buried him and his treasure in the grave in the long meadow and—"

"Nonsense!" said Ingeborg contemptuously.

"I guess it was a magpie," said Guda, brightening. "There are a great many about here, and I have heard wonderful stories about magpies."

"I wish there had been a name to the old letter," said mamma, on whom anything that spoke of affection made more impression than all the gold of "Ophir or Ind."

CHAPTER X.

TWO YEARS LATER.

THERE was a stir in the parish when the news of the treasure found at the parsonage was spread abroad. Two old peasants who were fixtures on the property, and passed along from one occupant to another, now suddenly became persons of the utmost importance. They remembered and related all things possible and impossible supposed to bear on the subject. A little cross-questioning from the pastor, however, soon showed that whatever confidence their neighbours might place in their stories of suspicious wanderers who at various times had been lodged at the parsonage, of robber haunts in

the woods hard by, or wonderful things dug out of the ground or fished out of the lake, there could nothing be got at that would determine the fate of a farthing in any court in Christendom.

As to the count, he became a frequent guest at the parsonage, and was never weary of talking with the pastor of "Vendla's find," which he panted to see with his own eyes and handle with his own hands.

Publicity was given to the whole transaction in every possible way, but no clue could be discovered as to the real owner.

After two years of patient and conscientious inquiry, the treasure was sold for the benefit of the little blind girl as the finder. The count had paid down the purchase-money in gold as good as that of the precious collection which he bore triumphantly away in his hand. There was a pleasant twinkle in his eyes as he did so, which did not look like the joy of a man who had driven a capital bargain; not quite like

the delight of a zealous collector, who had in possession the crowning gems of his beloved museum. Could it be he was dwelling on the thought that the way was now open for the education of that little blind girl, who had been brought like a stray lamb to his hearth when she had been found fighting her way in the storm?

Vendla herself was by no means rejoicing over her different prospects. Her long-cherished wish was fulfilled, but it involved a separation from the home where she had been sheltered, and loved, and made one of the family. She had long called the good pastor "uncle," and mamma was "aunt" to little blind Vendla, and they said "thou" to her as if she were one of their own children. Now she was to go out into the world and be a scholar with strange teachers, with no "aunt" to praise her when she did well, and no "uncle" to say, "Come, little Vendla, and tell us 'the plain part' of what you have been learning to-day." To leave

kind Stina, too, who had been like a mother to her;—it seemed impossible.

"Shall I have to go before they go forward? I do so much want to be at home then," asked little Vendla, with a doleful look at the pastor.

"You shan't go at all!" said Fritz, putting his arm round Vendla's skirts, as if she had spoken of absconding at that very moment.

"San't do 'tall!" echoed "baby Anna," who had come to have her voice in family matters, and seconded Fritz on every occasion.

The pastor drew Vendla to his side, and said, very tenderly, "We shall have you with us till autumn, and the children go forward the last day of June."

"I wish I were old enough to be with them," said Vendla hesitatingly. "Don't you think I might? I believe I could answer the questions, for I have always told over to Stina what you said in the class; and I've heard Hagbard go over his lessons till I couldn't help learning

them too. Dear uncle, don't you think I might try?"

The pastor was silent a moment, and then he said very earnestly, "Do you really wish from your heart to be a faithful child of the Lord Jesus, and to take the bread and wine, his body and blood, which he gives to all who sincerely love him?"

"I do," said little Vendla, and she bowed at his side, and laid her head on his knee. He placed his hand on her head, and prayed in his heart that God would lead her in the true path, and bring her at last to the heavenly home.

That Vendla was to "go forward" with the rest was now considered decided. All the winter the boys and girls of the parish had been studying with the pastor. The Children of the Supper the class was called in one single Swedish word. Vendla had been allowed to be present as a listener, a privilege she had thoroughly prized. The pastor had had his

own views in letting her be with the class, and the result had been what he had hoped and expected. He wanted to see little Vendla wholly of the family of Christ before she went from the shelter of his fireside into the stranger world without.

"There are not many that have your advantages, Vendla," said Stina, when the day of confirmation was near. "There were ninety of us young folks when I went forward. We read all together with the pastor once a week, and that was all. We didn't have much idea of what we were doing. I thought most of getting my new long black dress, and being like grown folks afterwards; and there were many like me. I didn't have your advantages, Vendla, or maybe I shouldn't have been so queer in my temper sometimes."

"Maybe not," said Vendla truthfully. "But I am queerer than I ought to be, Stina—real bad I have been often, I know. I don't want to be, and always am sorry afterwards, even

when I don't say so. I know I don't do right, but I want to."

"It's good to begin to walk straight when you are young, Vendla. It is not easy breaking old horses," said Stina, and she began to pull up weeds in the flower-bed near which she was standing, as if she could so help on her own work of amendment.

CHAPTER XI.

GOING FORWARD.

HE little church that stood alone on a hill-top, like a watcher in Zion, had thrown open its doors on a week-day; the little white church, with its black roof and spire, and old rounded windows. Thither, over the fields, in long dark lines, the cottagers were hastening.

Glad June had sprinkled the earth with bright flowers, but no one stopped to pick a harebell or a sweet yellow clover; the corn-flower that peered up in the midst of the rye tempted no little girl to weave a blue crown to set above her blue eyes. There was a decorous air in all the groups, in their Sunday dress,

who had thrown aside their work-a-day thoughts to be with the Children of the Lord's Supper in this great event of their lives.

The old, old church, with its round, low arches, was pure white within, save that the organ-loft, the pulpit, and the altar-screen were gilded all over, and gay here and there with the quaint figures of saints and apostles, who had been faithfully standing, with their books and their keys, while generation after generation of rural worshippers had been hidden away under the greensward of the churchyard.

Fresh branches had been laid in the deep window-seats, and the altar-screen was in a perfect bower of leafy young birches. On the communion-table the blossoming plants had so clustered, there hardly was room for the books of the pastor. A bright fuchsia that bloomed in the poorhouse was there, and Stina's own cactus and Vendla's tea-rose, fragile and fragrant, and all the rare flowers the count

had sent from his greenhouse. The children had twined arches of fresh birch branches, that thrice spanned the aisle that led up to the chancel, and the brass chandeliers had tufts of wild lupine young hands had plucked from the ditches.

At the highest green arch a gate had been placed to keep back the pressing, struggling crowd of strong peasants, all straining forward to catch a full sight of the children.

In the open space in front of the chancel, on rude benches, sat the boys and girls of the parish, bareheaded, in rows facing each other; while up and down between them the kind pastor was pacing to see if one of the flock could be missing. Yes, there was one for whom he long waited. Now in came the tall lassie, her face all in a blush of confusion. She had stepped on her black dress, long as it must be to suit the occasion, and had tried with what pins she could muster to hide the large rent rough shoes had made in the flimsy

alpaca. And then her black gloves, the first she had worn, she had been awkward in putting them on at the door; and knowing she surely was late had put her in such a fuss and a flurry. A kind look from the pastor at once reassured her, and she sank out of sight in the midst of her schoolmates.

Among the lines of the boys in their black coats and gloves, and narrow neckties as white as May sunshine could make them, sat Hagbard. So meek and humble he looked, a stranger would hardly have known him, so afraid of himself, afraid for his answers, and most afraid for his treacherous heart, that no human will could make holy.

With eyes fixed upon him sat mamma, her first-born, her first-fruits now offered to God from the depths of her sweet, loving nature.

Ingeborg was deep in counting the children; while Guda, weary with trying to keep Fritz in something like order, was thankful at last to let him stand at the spot where four pews made

a place at their meeting, and perch herself there on the dividing ledge at his side.

Every seat in the church was hopelessly crowded, and all through the aisles the people were standing; while right and left through the pack some curious new-comer would push right up to the gateway to get one look at the children, and then fall back for some other new-comer, as rough and as curious as he.

At the sound of the organ the singing began: the number of the hymn was hung in brass figures on the gilt-bordered slates that were here and there on the arches and up at the sides of the chancel.

Mamma's voice was clear and sweet as an angel's, though her throat seemed choked at the first, as standing she had a full view of the children.

After the hymn came an address from the pastor. He was as a voice, a voice from the Good Shepherd, calling the lambs to his bosom,

and offering refuge and safety, and only there the hope of being borne to the heavenly kingdom.

The short, earnest address once over, the pastor drew near to examine the children. At first it was but a swift going over the dear Bible stories of Old Testament saints and their doings, and there was no stumbling as round and round went the questions. But the catechism, too, must have its share of attention; and now some young brows grew troubled, and there was more than one anxious heart in the crowd of listeners for Axel, or Brita, or Karin, some sturdy young rustic much better at work than at study.

"This catechism you have learned, can you tell me who was its compiler, who put it together according to the doctrine contained in the Scriptures?" asked the pastor, in natural tones, and with a half smile that seemed to coax out the answer.

The poor girl who had stumbled in late grew

crimson and blurted out "Moses," much to the pastor's amazement.

"Not Moses, but Dr. Martin Luther," he said, and went on to her neighbour, leaving the poor frightened thing to come out of her maze, and be ready, perhaps, the next time to do better.

That was the only bad blunder for at least a whole hour, while the children were questioned and questioned of mysteries the angels desire to look into, and duties that, rightly fulfilled, would make our earth a Garden of Eden.

Hagbard was high in good courage. It was not so bad, after all—rather pleasant to be sitting there and giving out what father had taught him, in the face of the whole congregation. Just as he was lost for a moment in these wandering thoughts, came "pat" from the pastor the question, "How many are the books of the Old Testament?"

"Twenty-seven," said Hagbard, all in a hurry. "No! that's the New Testament. In the Old there are thirty-nine."

But Hagbard had lost self-possession, and after the five books of Moses he got hopelessly puzzled about what he had known as well as his letters, and his father at last passed on with the question, while Hagbard sat down in shame and confusion.

Mamma's eyes filled up for the moment, she felt so sorely for Hagbard.

"I don't wonder he got them wrong, I always do," poor Guda said to herself; while Ingeborg hid her face in Fritz's yellow ringlets, she was so ashamed of her brother.

Of all the children examined, none answered more fully and freely than Vendla. She thought not of who were listening; she knew not what eyes were upon her. She heard but the voice of the pastor, and spoke as her head and heart prompted.

After more than two hours of question and answer, the dreaded ordeal was over. Nils went round with a bucket of water fresh from the spring on the hillside. Each girl took the

glass in her gloved hand, drained it, and passed it on to her neighbour. The boys less formally had their cool drink from the bucket; and so came in a kind of a pause at the close of the first part of the service.

The children now came round the chancel.

"Do you believe in all the articles of the Apostles' Creed?" said the pastor, reciting them himself in the sections.

The boys answered "Yes," in full concord, as if but one voice were speaking; and then a second after came the "Yes" of the girls, but sweeter and higher.

Thrice the "Yes" was given for the creed, and thrice again, as they promised to strive to do the will of the Saviour, to give unto God their strongest, best love, and to love and to cherish their neighbour. Then all knelt humbly and joined in the "Our Father" to Him whose children they now, by their own choice, had freshly been made in a compact new and most sacred. Then a blessing was asked on them,

and when they rose up for the singing there were many young faces all wet with hot tears.

Again they knelt for the last, silent prayer, and the long-thought-of service was over.

The little gate was opened wide under the arch of green branches, and two by two passed out the children. The crowd drew aside in hushed silence, and no one ventured a nod or a greeting.

On the following Sunday the children came forward to the holy communion, all kneeling together.

God, who readeth all hearts, only knew the vows that went up from young spirits that morning, or the prayers that were offered by the deeply moved assembly who, standing and singing, saw them "go forward" to partake of the Supper.

When Hagbard came home that Sunday, he threw his arms round the neck of his mother and wept like a child on her bosom.

"God bless you, my boy!" was all she could

say, but from that hour their hearts were knitted more closely than ever.

Far away, in the still chamber in the garret, meanwhile, little Vendla had found a place of refuge and silence. There her spirit grew quiet and calm, and when she came down among the rest of the children they only felt she was more gentle and friendly than they had yet seen her.

"I love you, Vendla," said Fritz, as he put his fat hand in hers.

"We all love little Vendla, and better than ever to-day," said the pastor; and Vendla's young heart was glad with the best gladness that is tasted on earth,—the true love of God and our neighbour.

CHAPTER XII.

LEAVING HOME.

AUTUMN had come, and papa was going again on a journey, but this time not alone.

Hagbard had seen his mother packing his trunk, and had taken a parting lesson as to how to fold his best suit, and just where and when he must wear his store of new garments. Other parting words he had heard, which he was sure he should never forget, just such sweet words of loving advice as only a dear Christian mother can speak.

This was not quite a sad time for Hagbard. It had its bright side. Not merely that it would be nice to have such troops of boys as

companions, or that it would be charming to stay at mamma's oldest brother's, and have free range of the library, with all its books and shells and old medals. Even now it had been pleasant to go through his long-cherished treasures and choose out what he would keep to remember his childhood, and what he would give to the girls, and what would be just fit now for Fritz to put with his playthings. Then all were so specially kind, and made so much of him, he felt he was something uncommon, at least for the time; and on the whole this going from home was something exciting, and not half so bad as he had expected.

But Hagbard had not been the one object of thought in the household. There had been planning and fixing and cutting and working for Vendla; for she was to go away too, and to begin, in real earnest, her much-talked-of education.

Ingeborg wondered that Vendla showed no

pleasure at being fitted out so nicely, though she often said to mamma or to Stina, "It was so kind," or, "They were taking so much trouble about her." Vendla was very quiet—so quiet it seemed almost as if she were dumb, in addition to the blindness to which they had so long been accustomed.

The morning had come for the journey. Stina had just gone in with the last instalment of collars, and to put the finishing touch to the packing for Hagbard. Vendla had perched on her trunk, and was knocking her feet on the side, as if it were a pleasure to hurt herself a bit in the process.

Ingeborg came in at the moment. "You are so quiet, Vendla," she said. "You haven't once said you are sorry you are going away. If I were in your place I should cry as if my heart would break, I know I should."

"You couldn't be in my place, Ingeborg!" said Vendla hastily, while the tears rolled over her cheeks. "You couldn't be blind, and go

away among strange people and not know what they looked like. I mean to go, and I know it is right, and I ought to be thankful, and I don't want to make a fuss when everybody has been kind to me; but I almost wish I could die, it is so dreadful. I know everybody here, and I know the house; I had been here again and again before I was blind. But it is all dark to me where I am going. I shan't ever know really how it is. Oh, I don't want to be blind! I don't want to be blind!"

All Vendla's composure was gone, and in more wild words her sorrow burst forth.

Ingeborg heard in helpless amazement. She put her arm round Vendla, and wanted to be comforting; but her own self-reproach was uppermost, and she could only say, "I haven't been kind to you, Vendla; I feel it now. Won't you forgive me?"

Vendla kissed the lips that were put close to hers, and said, "It is not that! It is not that anybody hasn't been kind; but it is here, and

nobody can help me!" and she pressed her hands on her blind eyes.

"I'll go for papa," said Ingeborg, and away she sprang before Vendla could stop her.

The thought of the pastor's coming calmed Vendla in a moment. Indeed, her burst of sorrow had had its vent, and when the pastor came to comfort her, she was but sitting red and swollen, and trying to check the half-sobs that still showed traces of the storm.

As he sat down beside her she put her hand in his, and whispered, "I was wrong to be so impatient. It is over now, and I will try to be cheerful and learn all I can, and to like everybody, and do just what I ought to. Indeed I will try."

"May God help you, little Vendla!" said the pastor tenderly. "You must think how we all love you here, and forget we are far away. Just fancy we are in the next room, and by-and-by you will make us all glad by coming in among us. Think so of us, and of your best

Friend, who is the same in every place, and is always near you. It will be quite true of him, and that will be your best comfort."

A cheerful light came in little Vendla's face, and she went through bidding good-bye to all at the parsonage without a single tear, and was not even overcome when Stina lifted her into the carriage, as if she had been a baby, and kissed her like a loving mother, instead of a rough old servant, who generally tried to pretend she had no feelings at all. Mamma and the children stood on the steps to wave their farewells when their voices could no longer be heard.

"See! see, Vendla! Now we shall turn, and this is our last chance for a good-bye!" said Hagbard, forgetting in his excitement Vendla's misfortune.

Vendla suppressed the pettish "I can't see" which sprang to her lips, and silently bent towards the window. The pastor's kind arm went round her as if to settle her more firmly

on the seat. She appreciated the tender little movement. How was it he always understood her, and had such a sweet way of expressing his sympathy ?

There were many who were poor and blind, but few had found such kind friends in their trouble. And Vendla's sad thoughts were changed to hearty thanksgiving.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAPA'S SECRET.

"IT is so lonely without Hagbard and Vendla," said Guda to Ingeborg when they were fairly shut in by the first snows of winter.

"Lonely! I should think so!" exclaimed Ingeborg; "and papa always studying and writing. He never seems to have time to have fun with us as he used to—at least not very often. I'll tell you what it is, Guda, papa is learning real lessons! He's studying just as we do, and I heard mamma say something to him about an examination. I wonder who knows enough to examine papa?"

"I suppose it must be the king," pondered Guda, her eyes open with wonder.

"It's much more likely the bishop," said Ingeborg. "There's been something private ever since the count and the bishop dined here that day so long ago. I have felt it all along."

"I'll ask mamma all about it," said Guda.

"I would," said Ingeborg, quite willing that Guda should take the straightforward way of getting at the secret. Mamma made no mystery out of the matter when Guda came with her questions. Yes, papa was going to try for promotion. He had long been urged to do so by the bishop and all his best friends. She hoped, of course, he would succeed, now he had attempted it, though for her part she was contented to live as they always had done. It would be a trial to leave the old home, and the dear simple folk around them.

"Should we have to go away?" asked Guda in surprise. "I shouldn't like that! I hope

papa won't succeed!—No, I don't hope that; but—" and Guda stopped, sorely puzzled by the new state of affairs.

"I don't *hope* anything!" exclaimed Ingeborg. "I *know* papa will be able to do just what he wants to; and if we must go somewhere else to live, it would be rather nice. We are too old now to mind it."

"But we were born here, and we know every one round here," urged Guda; "and—I wonder what Stina will say."

And what did Stina say when Guda went to her with her news and all her misgivings?

"Don't sell the bear's skin before you have shot him, Miss Guda! Maybe there'll be no moving at all. I shan't say *hej* till we are over the stream. We can wait, we can wait."

In spite of Stina's pretended composure she was in a high state of excitement, when just after Christmas papa went away to be approved for promotion. As she sat at her weaving she shook her head and talked to herself till mamma

grew quite uneasy about her. She could not think what was the matter with Stina.

There had been a kind of a shadow over Christmas this year, with Hagbard and Vendla away; but New Year, when the poorest children of the parish always came to the second lighting of the tree, had been more lively than usual, and the sisters had said to each other that that had been the best part of the holidays.

Stina always had leave to use her spare time for herself, from Yule till the twentieth day after, "Knut's day," as it stood in the almanac. This year she had been weaving a wonderful blanket-shawl in these long winter evenings. "Warp, woof, and workmanship, shearing, spinning, and dyeing, all my own, owny-tony," said Stina, as she held up the wonderful garment, completed at last. "'Twentieth day Knut dances Yule out,' and my work dances out with it!"

The shawl was laid in the depths of the

inviolable bureau, and then Stina declared she was ready to have the pastor come home, and all things go on as usual.

Home he came very soon. As the sleigh drew up at the door mamma was on the steps, with a question in her eye; a question which was answered by a glance,—a glance humble, but thankful and glad.

"Did you miss, papa?" asked Guda, to the great satisfaction of Stina, who was helping papa off with his wrappings with an eager, anxious look in her face.

"No, Guda," said papa with a smile, "I got through; and you are all glad, I suppose."

Papa got more than his share of kisses all round; and Stina gave him her great hand to shake, to express her satisfaction.

Fresh mysteries came now on the carpet. There were comings and goings, the writing and receiving of letters, and at last it was all settled that papa was to be rector in a very

large parish in the town where the bishop was living. Hagbard could now be at home, and still go on with his studies; and the girls could have lessons in music and French, and a room for themselves, with a wardrobe and bureau. And there was a nursery, too, and a nice little bed-room for Hagbard, and a dining-room so large that the piece of carpet Stina had lately been weaving would only just reach across it.

What chatting and talking and planning there were, to be sure, at the parsonage!

Papa and mamma had their own sweet times in the study, when they thanked God together for the joy and the blessings that had been theirs in their wee crowded home, and humbly hoped the kind Father in heaven would show them the same loving favour in the wider sphere to which they were going. How they arranged for this old woman and that bed-ridden cottager! How they managed to have some sweet, kind office for all, to make this

last winter the gladdest their people had known! And how the pastor did preach such warm, earnest sermons, like a father's outpouring of deep loving counsel to the children he was leaving for ever!

CHAPTER XIV.

STINA'S GREAT CHANGE.

AMID all the preparations for the coming removal, Stina was fitful and moody.

"You don't like the change, Stina," said her mistress at last.

"It will be a great change for me, ma'am," said Stina; "and perhaps it won't be for the better."

"You will have more to help you, Stina, now we can afford it," said mamma, very kindly. "You have been good and faithful, and never spared yourself; but now, I hope, we can make it lighter and pleasanter for you, so that you will have a little more rest."

"I never was one that cared to be idling round resting," said Stina sharply. "I hope to work as long as I am able; but this is the short of it: if mistress is willing, I'd like not to go to the new place. I know I am bound for a whole year to come, as I didn't name it in season; but maybe mistress will let me off, as the circumstances are new and unexpected."

"Not go with us, Stina!" exclaimed mamma, who felt as if the earth gave way under her feet. "Why, you are just one of the family. Where would you go if you didn't stay with us?"

"Well," said Stina, plucking at her apron, "perhaps it is stupid of me, but Hans and I have made up our minds to be married, and perhaps it is as well it should be now. It wouldn't seem right to be published and tied up in any other church than our own here; and here I should have my well-wishers to say Amen at the wedding. And then in the new place it would be better for mistress to begin

with new folks. I ain't just so sweet and nice spoken as I might be, and that might not be the best example. Then there's Hans gets laid up times with the rheumatism and kinder needs me, you see."

"Mistress need not be afraid he ain't a right liver," hastily added Stina, seeing her mistress looked anxious. "He's been a lost sheep, as one may say, but he was took up and brought home. He reckoned he got converted out there, over the sea. He hadn't no father's house to go to and ask forgiveness, so back he comes to the fatherland, as if he would make up with old Sweden—and me too;" and here Stina's lip quivered. "He thought of me, and maybe he hadn't done quite right by me, but, bless you, I never had a hard thought about him. I've got money laid up, as mistress knows, but he is able to shirk for himself. His lame arm has kinder recommended him, and he gets a good bit of work to do, and—I never could have made up my mind to tell you

if it hadn't been for this break-up. Now it's out, ma'am! But Providence does arrange it queer for some folks."

"My good Stina!" exclaimed mamma.

"I ain't any good Stina! I am a bad, cross old thing!" And the bad, cross old thing stooped down and kissed her mistress's hand, and then went off to the kitchen in a terrible hurry.

The news of Stina's approaching marriage went through the house like wildfire.

"And will Stina have a long white veil, and a crown on her head, like any one else? How funny!" said Guda.

"Of course she will," said Ingeborg; "and I shall make her crown, and put it on for her too, and make her look just as nice as I can."

So the children that Stina had nursed in her arms fixed her up for the wedding. Of course, she wore a black dress, like a true peasant bride, and had a lace veil all down to her feet. Her green myrtle crown, like a little open-work,

upturned basket, stood on the top of her head, with her bands of reddish-light hair laid smoothly over her forehead below. Guda said Stina "really looked beautiful," but Guda's taste was not unquestioned authority.

Right after church, on a clear April day, Stina came leading her husband up to the altar, his usually obstreperous hair brushed down very flat, and a roll of newspapers put up his empty coat sleeve, to make him look more presentable.

With nudgings and promptings from Stina, he got through the service at last, and came down the aisle, as he went up, looking more like a delinquent in the hands of a sturdy policeman than a jubilant bridegroom blessed with the woman of his choice after twenty long years of betrothal.

CHAPTER XV.

NOT DEAD.

"I FEEL as though Vendla were dead," said Guda, after looking a long time absently out of the window.

"Dead! what makes you say such a thing?" said Ingeborg, starting. "Papa says such feelings are only foolish notions."

"I didn't mean any harm," answered Guda, quite meekly. "But it does seem as if Vendla were dead, because she went away, and we never see her, and she never writes to us. Those letters she sends are not a bit like her; she just says she is well, and is getting on, and she thanks papa and mamma for their kindness. It is about the same every time;

but we don't know anything about Vendla after all."

"What a start you gave me! Is that what you mean?" said Ingeborg. "It is always so hard to know what you are driving at, Guda. Of course, Vendla's letters are not like herself, and no wonder; who could write naturally, standing dictating to somebody you don't really know what you want to say to people you have lived with as long as Vendla has with us? But, after all, we did not know so much what Vendla really thought when she was at home. Perhaps it was because we couldn't look into her eyes to see what she was thinking."

Poor little Vendla! Shut up in her darkness, she had been having her own struggles while it had seemed to Guda as if she were dead. The teachers thought of her as a quiet, industrious, intelligent pupil, who was doing exceedingly well. The scholars said she was hard to get acquainted with, and hadn't any

particular friend. She did not feel very friendly, poor child. Life seemed hard, and lonely, and dreary away from the sweet, loving spirit of her dear adopted home. It was slow work for her learning to read with her fingers. Her young hands had been toughened by work under Stina's direction, and her sensitiveness of touch, she fancied, was hopelessly gone. No one knew the depths of discouragement through which the little girl was courageously going. No one knew how the tears wet her pillow at night, as she said to herself, "I shall never, never learn!" and at last fell asleep with a prayer on her lips to Him who has ever some balm for the sorrowful soul.

In the morning Vendla was again the quiet and dutiful pupil, and no one guessed why those dark lines encircled her eyes, or why her thin lips were so tightly pressed together, with a look so firm and determined.

At last came letters from Vendla—real letters. Short they were at first, and awkwardly printed,

but they were from Vendla's own self, and she seemed to have come back into the life of the parsonage. The children felt that they touched her now. She was no longer as if she were dead.

Soon appeared a little basket, really woven by Vendla's own hand, for mamma's ever-troublesome keys. It was but a simple affair of broad bands of white and red shavings, but it was as precious to mamma as if it had been of exquisite workmanship. Next came a knit purse for papa, so charmingly made that Guda sat down at once to fashion one like it for Hagbard. Of each new kind of work that Vendla had mastered a specimen went home as a present, with Vendla's grateful affection so woven in that no one could ever mistake it. Her letters grew longer, and written so nicely that at last Fritz took possession of one, and declared it would just do for a "copy." Time went on, and Vendla had learned to let her hand run over the raised type of the book,

while her face grew brighter and brighter as new thoughts came pouring in to quicken her clear, intelligent mind.

While life was thus changing for Vendla, a change, more outward than inward, had been going on with the dear ones from whom she had parted.

There had been an upturning, and a moving, and a settling. There had been farewells, and a journey, and a welcome from new friends. Instead of the tiny parsonage far out in the country, there was the comfortable rectory in the outskirts of the town. Instead of the cramped, cozy quarters, with the old-fashioned furniture, there were the rooms many and spacious, and the pretty new things all mixed in with the old.

The frame of the picture was changed, but the family group was the same. The same loving spirit that had brightened the humbler abode, and been a centre of joy to the simple peasants of the lone country parish, had come,

like a breath of pure air, to bring blessings to the new and less primitive flock.

The old truths that had given life and health and hope to the souls of the rustics, were making their way to the not less yearning and human hearts of the dwellers in town.

New respectful love was growing up towards the pastor. Mamma had her friends in all stations; and as to the girls, Ingeborg said at least twice a week, "I told you so, Guda! It was not so bad to move after all, for it really is nicer here than it was in the old home."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEW "FIND."

FIVE happy years had gone by for the pastor, and not a shadow had fallen over his home; but now days of watching and sorrow had come. Scarlet fever had broken out in the household. Baby Anna had gone from the love and joy of her short earthly life to the better love and better joy of the heavenly. Fritz lay struggling with the same fearful disease, and the mourners had scarcely time to weep for the lost in the hurry and worry of waiting upon the suffering boy.

Vendla had been expected, not for a visit, but to take her place once more in the house-

hold. Now a letter had been written to warn her that it would not be safe for her to come into the air so tainted with the dreadful infection. She must go to Stina's, in Stockholm, and come home when all danger was over.

Stina was of course in great perturbation, and sorrow and joy by turns had the mastery. What with sympathy for the grief at the pastor's, and delight at the prospect of a visit from Vendla, the faithful old servant was almost demented.

By the pastor's direction, a room had been rented for Vendla in the building where, on the ground floor, was the small baker's shop over which Stina in person presided. There all sorts of loaves, twists, and rolls, and fresh cream, and milk that was milk, could be bought and consumed on the premises, if it suited the plans of the buyer. Suit the buyers it did, and not a place of the kind was patronized better in all the great city. Stina was proud of her custom, and liked to reckon up who

had been in during the day to Hans in the evening. He, in the neat uniform of a messenger licensed by the city, would listen with apparent attention, while he mentally counted the gains of his own day's transactions.

How Stina swept and reswept and garnished the furnished apartment that was waiting for Vendla! What a bouquet she had bought to stand on the table! What a repast of strawberries and cream, and fresh rolls, and milk cold as the ice-chest could make it, stood ready to tempt the dear stranger, and tell of the love that had planned it!

To find Vendla saddened by the death of baby Anna was what Stina of course had expected, but she soon was quite certain that something more was the matter. She knew there must be some cause for the quiet, brooding, anxious expression that was on the dear face in the evening, and again when the morning light was upon it.

"I'll get to the bottom of this, whatever it

is!" said Stina to herself; and when she had put the neat room in beautiful order, and seated Vendla on the nice sofa-bed, now fine in its costume for daylight, she stood up before her determined to fathom the matter.

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and Stina had all her doubts settled without so much as a question.

"May I come in?" asked the count. Stina dropped a volley of courtesies, and Vendla rose up to receive him.

It had been a trial to Vendla that not one of the dear ones at home could be at the asylum to hear her examined. "Not a person who knows me, or cares a whit for my lessons or my singing," Vendla had thought as she heard the stir of the strangers assembled on the closing day of the session. Vendla, of course, had not seen the little old face of the count, who sat with his head on one side not to lose a word or a note in all the two hours he lingered and listened.

"I am glad it was so I could hear you," he began, without any phrases of commonplace greeting. "I liked your lessons, and I liked your singing. Now, what are you going to do with this education?"

"I wanted—I wanted to teach—to be independent and look out for myself," said Vendla, her voice in a tremble, as the trouble that had weighed on her heart was brought up to the surface. "I hoped till the last it would be, but it seems I am too young for the places that open for teachers. Of course, they like to have me at home, but there is no one that needs me; and I think it would be better if I were kept busy, and felt I was supporting myself. I should be happier, I know; and I should like it, too, for reasons I can't talk of."

The count took no notice of this quick burst of feeling, at least not in word; but Stina saw how his face twitched, as it always did when he was excited.

"I like your voice," he said, very coolly.

"You have it in you to make a real singer. I heard our great song-birds when they were beginners, and I know the meaning of such notes as you can give out. Now, here's what I have on my mind. Such a voice don't belong to the person that has it, but to the world who ought to hear it. You must be put under a master, just such a master as you can have here on the spot, and we shall soon see what you can do."

Vendla's face glowed with brightness, but it fell as she said, "But I want to be independent. What I had from 'the find' was used up last year, and dear uncle has been helping me since."

"Your voice is the best 'find' you could have," said the count. "Why, you will make money hand-over-hand as soon as you are ready to come out as a singer. I am only your banker, just for the time; you can pay me afterwards if you like best. But now, child, you had better begin your lessons to-morrow. I'll make the arrangements to-day,

and send you a note about the hours, and all that."

In another minute the count had gone out, with his little formal bow at the door, as if nothing unusual had happened.

And so Vendla's lessons began; and what a joy they were only a blind lover of music can imagine. For Vendla, six weeks had gone by like a dream, while all round the household the dreaded disease had gone at the pastor's, each case growing lighter and lighter; but Vendla must still be in exile until there could be no danger from her coming among them.

A strange kind of exile was this new existence for Vendla. The count still lingered in town, and Vendla had been shown to his friends, and petted and courted. The splendour and beauty of homes to which she was welcomed were little to her in her darkness. She knew there were kind voices always ready to greet her, and felt thankful to all these good strangers; but no one could be like the dear

old friends at the pastor's, who never flattered, but tenderly loved her.

Vendla was to give a kind of a little parlour rehearsal at the count's married sister's, and their friends had gathered to hear her. They listened, and wept, and applauded.

"Yes; Vendla's voice was the best 'find,'—a blessing, a gift, for her and her country and her whole generation." So said the count, and so said they all; and Vendla smiled for a moment, her colour mounting to her temples. For a moment only she smiled, and the red flush told her excitement; then she grew pale, and sank in a swoon on the floor. So began a long nervous fever for the little blind singer. She was nursed and watched over in the home where she had fallen in that terrible swoon, and Stina was always at hand to obey her least motion.

At last the weary worst time of her illness was over, and helpless and trembling she was led to the sofa. Then came sweet drives to

the country, and then little chats, when the colour began to come and go in her face as before, and the strangers who had learned to love her so dearly said one to another, "She is safe now; the danger is over."

The count was in town again for a visit, and he had come into the room where Vendla was sitting in a low easy-chair.

"I have news about our famous neck-ring," he said. "I found in the library here a manuscript journal, kept two hundred years ago by the last of the Hjeltehjelms; an old bachelor he was, like myself. His property he willed to the state, and all his collection. He tells in the journal of a theft from his house of just such a ring, and the coins the same by the closest description, and even the letter-case he mentions as holding a treasure he values more than all the gold in the world. Of course the 'find' really belongs to the National Museum, where I long ago had the honour of putting it, though I did not venture to tell you."

"Then it was a thief after all," said Vendla, with great disappointment. "And you didn't keep it, either; and it wasn't my 'find;' and you—you—" The count understood the weight of obligation that Vendla was feeling.

"Vendla," he said very slowly,—"Vendla, your finding that treasure has been the great blessing of my life, and you must never regret it. That brought me first as a familiar guest to the parsonage. Before, I had always looked on religion as something cold and hard and repulsive, and yet I was so inconsistent I looked down on pastors, who were like men of the world. What I wanted I cannot now say; but what I saw there was a new revelation. My 'find' was better than yours, Vendla, and worth more to me. So now we are even."

The count did not say that he had found for himself the pearl of great price, and Vendla did not ask him; she only said, warmly, "Yes; everybody ought to be better for being at uncle's! I am so glad you have told me this.

I am thankful now about my 'find.' I shall be thankful about it as long as I live."

Vendla did not need the doctor or kind friends to tell her that she would never do for a public singer. She well understood, with her nervous organization, it would be no career for her. In her long illness she had had much time for serious thought, and had found out that luxury and flattery were not the best food even for a poor blind girl like herself, and she could thank God that he had removed her from what might have been for her a path of temptation. Her bubble had burst. She had planned how Stina and Hans would go about with her, and she would give concerts, and make ever so much money. And what would she not do for all whom she loved! What poor people she would make happy! And everybody that was blind would have reason to thank her!

This little dream was all over, and Vendla was going home to the pastor's,—grateful for

the dear, loving circle, who would welcome her as one of themselves; and for the dear, kind pastor, who would give her the sound Christian counsel that would keep her weak heart in the pathway of peace and content.

And as to her voice, she could sing in the church as much as she chose; and how sweet it would be to give them all pleasure! She was glad she brought that, at least, to the family stock, to help to make life harmlessly happy.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BIRTHDAY.

INGEBORG had been cutting roses, with the dew fresh upon them; and Guda had put a white cloth on the table, and placed a frosted cake of her own making upon it.

Around the edge of the table Ingeborg wreathed her bright roses, and pinned a cluster of buds in the drooping cloth at the corners. Then a green crown was soon woven by mamma, whose face was the picture of love as she did it. All the household came with their gifts, and laid them about on the table; for this was the pastor's fiftieth birthday.

He was still closely confined in his bedroom,

and not allowed to come out till he was lawfully summoned. A willing prisoner he was, and glad to be certain of quiet; for the Book of all books had been open before him, and he had spoken with his dearest, best Friend there in the silence, while all were so merry and busy without.

How they took him captive when all was made ready! How they crowned him, and bore him to the honoured seat at the table! How they all clustered about him to give him their kisses and the sweetest of birthday greetings! Hagbard, who had hung up in the entry the white cap of an Upsala student the evening before, now read his long-studied verses, gotten up for the occasion in the shadow of the old university. The father's fifty long years were sainted every one in the loving rhymes of the son.

Mamma was melted to tears, but whether at the merit of Hagbard as a gifted young poet, or at the spirit pervading the verses, no

one had had time to decide; when papa began fumbling about in the parcels, and proceeded to take off the wrappings, and have his glee and his thanks over all the nice gifts, as if he were but a boy after all.

"I ought to grant favours, and almost give orders to-day," he said, with a smile, "as I sit here like a king with my crown on. I wonder what all my children would ask if I had the power of granting their wishes. As for mamma," he said, with a look that showed he had not grown cold since his courtship, "we have long had our hopes and our wishes together, and we know where to go to get our best blessings. This is only a play for you children.—Come, Fritz,—we begin at the bottom,—what would you wish from papa if he were a king like Gustavus?"

"A pony; you know it, papa. It is what I always am wanting," said Fritz, not at all puzzled to come to a decision.

"That mamma's generous brother has prom-

ised next week for your birthday," said papa; "so, you see, the first wish has been granted."

Fritz could hardly help turning three somersaults right there in the dining-room; but he calmed down to try to hear what Ingeborg said, for she had asked to whisper her wish to her father.

How the dear pastor's face lighted as he listened and listened, with tears in his eyes; for Ingeborg asked that he would forgive her all that was past—all her wrong-doings—her pride, and her love of the world, and help her to try to do better.

"Now, Vendla! Now, Vendla is ready, I am sure," said the pastor, turning all eyes at once from poor Ingeborg, who could not help sobbing.

Vendla was flushed, of course, as she rose up to answer, but she was the picture of health and of the sweet peace that was now like a fountain within her. "I am ashamed to have any wish, dear uncle," she said, "and yet I

have, and so I shall tell it. I should like it if sometimes I could sing hymns to some one that is sick in the parish, or if I could teach some child Scripture verses, or some little thing like that, if you could arrange it that it wouldn't look forward. You understand?"

"Yes, yes; I understand," said the pastor. "And now I have really a secret to tell."

The pastor's secret was quite a long story. The count, who for months had been paralyzed, had dropped away quietly at last, mourned by his friends and his household and tenants. This they all knew. They knew, too, that papa had lately had much mysterious business about the will of the count. This will, the pastor now said, provided that a sum should be set aside, the interest of which should be taken to maintain in a comfortable home four blind little children. They were not merely to be cared for, and fed, and have a good education, but they must be trained up as Christians—to love and obey the good Saviour, who

only can give the true light that shines in the kingdom of heaven. To Vendla the care of these children was to be trusted, with Stina as house-mother or matron, and the pastor to manage all difficult matters, and give to the new home his oversight, counsel, and blessing.

Of course Stina was there for the birthday, and one of her strong hands now grasped that of the pastor, the other that of Vendla, who trembled with joy till she could not speak for the moment.

It was Stina's firm voice that answered. God helping her, she would try to be in the new home just what such a blessed, happy old woman "had ought to." "And Hans, too," she added, "it will be the making of him. He feels the need of some young creatures to fondle and be kind to. It is a nice thing, too, to have a man in the house. Besides, it is always a help in managing children."

The pastor smiled to hear honest Stina putting her husband into the new place. It

was a pleasant, kind smile, and Stina understood that Hans might be a part of the household.

Vendla said nothing, but she kissed papa and mamma, and sat down with her heart so full of deep thankfulness to the one that was gone, and to the heavenly Giver, that she had no words that just then could be spoken.

"And what is my Guda's wish?" said papa, as he looked into the round, friendly face of his fair eldest daughter.

"I have been thinking," said Guda, "and I really have not anything to wish for. I am sure I have the very best home in the world;" and in one glance of content she took in all the dear faces about her.

"Just like my own Guda," said papa; and she saw he was pleased, and that made her happy—as happy as her calm nature admitted.

Hagbard knew now his turn had come, and he stood up, but for a moment was silent, and then he said, with an effort, "I will ask now,

papa, what I have long been wanting to say. Do you think— May I try to be just such a pastor as you are? May I take the holiest calling to be my profession?"

"The dearest wish of my heart!" burst from mamma, as she folded her boy in her arms.

"God's blessing on you, my child!" said papa. "May you do the good I have left undone, and be a far better pastor than your father!"

While papa had been hearing the birthday wishes, the table had been spread for breakfast; and now, instead of the usual couplet from Fritz, came from the pastor a full, earnest prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

What a happy family that was that sat down to the morning meal together! Papa a crowned king in the midst of subjects who did him the heartiest homage!

The day was still before the dear pastor,— his birthday, with its scores of calls, and free gifts, and heartfelt good wishes from old friends

and new, from rich friends and poor,—its telegrams and its letters, and its sweet home-prayer and its tender good-nights at the close. Life's little day had, too, still for him its many glad hours and its calm eventide, the beautiful old age of the just. Beyond was the light of the Eternal Sun which knows no setting.

THE END.

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